

OH, CHERRY RIPE

TAFFETA AND HOTSPUR

WILDFIRE KISS

CLAUDY CONN'S
BESTSELLING
REGENCIES

Contents

- Claudy Conn's Bestselling Regencies

- Wildfire Kiss, Taffeta and Hotspur, and Oh, Cherry Ripe

- Books by Claudy Conn

- Copyright Page

- Contents

- Wildfire Kiss

- Copyright Page

- Dedication

- Contents

- Author's Note

- ~ One ~

- ~ Two ~

- ~ Three ~

- ~ Four ~

- ~ Five ~

- ~ Six ~

- ~ Seven ~

- ~ Eight ~

- ~ Nine ~

- ~ Ten ~

- ~ Eleven ~

- ~ Twelve ~

- ~ Thirteen ~

- ~ Fourteen ~

- ~ Fifteen ~

- ~ Sixteen ~

- ~ Seventeen ~

- ~ Eighteen ~

- ~ Nineteen ~

- ~ Twenty ~

- ~ Twenty-One ~

- ~ Twenty-Two ~

- ~ Twenty-Three ~

- ~ Epilogue ~

- Taffeta and Hotspur

- Copyright Page

- Contents

- ~ One ~

- ~ Two ~

- ~ Three ~

- ~ Four ~

- ~ Five ~

- ~ Six ~
 - ~ Seven ~
 - ~ Eight ~
 - ~ Nine ~
 - ~ Ten ~
 - ~ Eleven ~
 - ~ Twelve ~
 - ~ Thirteen ~
 - ~ Epilogue ~
- Oh, Cherry Ripe
 - Copyright Page
 - Dedication
 - Contents
 - ~ One ~
 - ~ Two ~
 - ~ Three ~
 - ~ Four ~
 - ~ Five ~
 - ~ Six ~
 - ~ Seven ~
 - ~ Eight ~
 - ~ Nine ~
 - ~ Ten ~
 - ~ Eleven ~
 - ~ Twelve ~
 - ~ Thirteen ~
 - ~ Fourteen ~
 - ~ Fifteen ~
 - ~ Sixteen ~
 - ~ Seventeen ~
 - ~ Eighteen ~
 - ~ Nineteen ~
 - ~ Twenty ~
 - ~ Twenty-One ~
 - ~ Epilogue ~
- Disorderly Lady (unedited)
- Through Time—Pursuit
 - ~ Prologue ~
 - ~ One ~
- About Claudy Conn
 - Read more about Claudy Conn's books

Claudy Conn's Bestselling Regencies

Wildfire Kiss, Taffeta and Hotspur, and Oh, Cherry Ripe

Books by Claudy Conn

Risqué Regencies

Myriah Fire
Oh, Cherry Ripe
Rogues, Rakes & Jewels
Taffeta and Hotspur
Wildfire Kiss
After the Storm
Runaway Heart
Lady Bess
Lady Star
Serena
Disorderly Lady (*coming in September*)

~

Witches, Warlocks, and Dark Magic

Dark Love
Netherby Halls
Lady X

~

Legend Series

Prince, Prelude—Legend
Spellbound—Legend
Aaibhe—Shee Queen (Novelette)
Shee Willow—Legend
Prince in the Mist (Novella)
Trapped—Legend
Free Falling—Legend
Catch & Hold—Legend

~

Through Time Series (time travel)

Through Time—Pursuit
Through Time—Whiplash
Through Time—Slamming
Through Time—Frankie
Through Time—Compulsion

~

Shadow Series

ShadowLove—Stalkers
ShadowHeart—Slayer

ShadowLife—Hybrid

~

Hungry Moon Series

Hungry Moon: Quicksilver

Hungry Moon: Destiny

Hungry Moon: Jodi (coming in Aug)

Claudy Conn's Bestselling Regencies

By

Claudy Conn

Copyright Page

Claudy Conn's Bestselling Regencies

By Claudy Conn

<http://www.claudyconn.com>

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Wildfire Kiss

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Taffeta and Hotspur

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Oh, Cherry Ripe

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Excerpt of *Disorderly Lady*

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Excerpt of *Through Time—Pursuit*

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Contents

Claudy Conn's Bestselling Regencies

Books by Claudy Conn

Title Page

Copyright Page

Wildfire Kiss

Taffeta and Hotspur

Oh, Cherry Ripe

Excerpt: Disorderly Lady (unedited)

Excerpt: Through Time—Pursuit

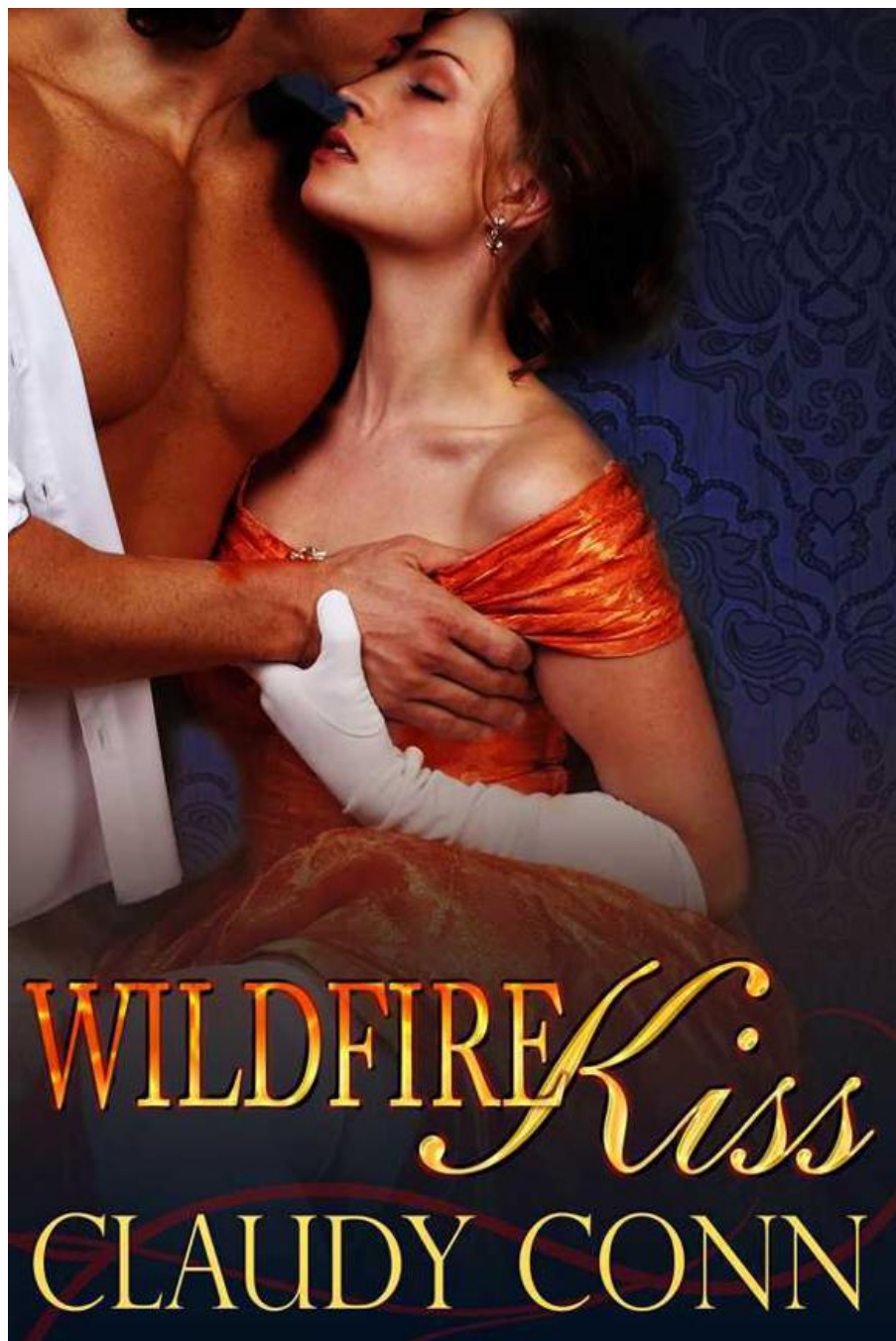
~ Prologue ~

~ One ~

About Claudy Conn

Read more about Claudy Conn's Books

Wildfire Kiss



Wildfire Kiss

By

Claudy Conn

Copyright Page

Wildfire Kiss

By Claudy Conn

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Dedication

This one is for my editor, Karen Babcock,
who always makes me smile.

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Author's Note

~ One ~

~ Two ~

~ Three ~

~ Four ~

~ Five ~

~ Six ~

~ Seven ~

~ Eight ~

~ Nine ~

~ Ten ~

~ Eleven ~

~ Twelve ~

~ Thirteen ~

~ Fourteen ~

~ Fifteen ~

~ Sixteen ~

~ Seventeen ~

~ Eighteen ~

~ Nineteen ~

~ Twenty ~

~ Twenty-One ~

~ Twenty-Two ~

~ Twenty-Three ~

~ Epilogue ~

Author's Note

A reader recently remarked to me that women in the early 1800s simply did not behave as my heroines do in my regency novels.

So not true. This was NOT the Victorian Era. This was the Regency Era, and during this time, hedonism ruled the society in which the ‘fashionables’ traveled.

This particular era produced flagrant rule breakers, such as Lady Caroline Lamb [note 1], married and yet wild and free thinking. She would don the clothing of a lad and rush off to meet her lover, Lord Byron. She would burn his letters in public for all the world to witness.

The unmarried Godwin sisters [note 2], one outrageous enough to publish articles about women and what their rights ‘should be’, bucked the system and became known for their ‘modern’ notions during the regency day.

Singular women with ideas of their own could not be beaten down, and they stood up for what they believed in and worked towards a time when women would demand the right to vote, the right to own and delegate their own property, the right to choose a mate, and, of course, the right to stand equal to men.

It is because of those individuals that my imagination has been spurred to write about rule-breaking heroines. It is because of those women that I see so much more than the sedate woman content to simply do what she was told.

My heroines just don’t do what they are told. They do what they feel, what their mind and heart drive them to do. After all, it truly was the rule-breaking women who allowed us to be who we are today!

Note 1: Lady Caroline’s obsession with Byron would define much of her later life and as well as influence both her and Byron’s works. They would write poems in the style of each other, about each other, and even embed overt messages to one another in their verse. After a thwarted visit to Byron’s home, Lady Caroline wrote “Remember Me!” into the flyleaf of one of Byron’s books. He responded with the hate poem:

*Remember thee! Remember thee!
Till Lethe quench life’s burning stream
Remorse and shame shall cling to thee,
And haunt thee like a feverish dream!*

*Remember thee! Ay, doubt it not.
Thy husband too shall think of thee!
By neither shalt thou be forgot,
Thou false to him, thou fiend to me!*

Note 2: Their mother, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, was an ardent feminist and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792. In this work, she spoke out vehemently against the position of women in society, most notably describing marriage as “legal prostitution”.

Given her radical views, it is perhaps surprising that in later years she married. However, Godwin’s intent was to provide security for her unborn child, which she lacked when her older daughter, Fanny Imlay, had been born and her lover, Gilbert, had deserted her.

~ One ~

LADY BARBARA CURLED a long, thick tress of black hair around her slender finger and bit her full lower lip. A tear formed in one dark eye, but she held it back. She wouldn't cry. Not one tear would she shed. He had reason to be angry, but she was not going to allow him to make her cry. She had done nothing wrong, whatever the world might think.

She stood against his tirade and allowed him to finish.

"And it is no use standing there looking for all the world like an innocent kitten, for we know that you are not! Don't we?"

"I have never claimed to be innocent, and I am certainly not a kitten," she answered, knowing in advance this would fuel his irritation.

It did.

He spluttered incoherently before he finally shouted, "No, by ..." He managed to stop the curse that sprang to his tongue; what followed, she knew, had been greatly tempered with admirable control. "*Certes!* You think yourself a tigress, don't you? You think you are ready to take on the jungle out there all alone?" He didn't wait for her to answer the question as he rattled on, wagging a finger at her, "Well, by God, you are *not* a tigress, and the jungle out there will slaughter you!" He turned his back on her as he made an obvious attempt to regain control of himself.

Lady Babs watched him silently, believing more of the same was on its way.

She was correct.

He turned back to her, and said in a low, hard voice, "That you could have gone behind my back, without my knowledge, against my expressed wishes—"

"Papa," she cut in on a plea. "I used a pseudonym. No one will ever find out the true identity of the author. I have Mr. Murry's word on it."

"Ha! What do you know of Murry? Who is to say he won't reveal your name for a price?"

"He won't. Besides, Byron publishes through him, and Byron said he is to be trusted."

She watched her father as he struggled with his temper once more, and she fancied she saw spittle at his thin lips. "*Byron? I don't trust Byron!* And that is another thing. I won't have you in Byron's pocket. The man is a libertine. Why, it is rumored that he and his sister—" He stopped himself,

obviously realizing he shouldn't speak of such things with her. Barbara chewed at her bottom lip to keep herself from smiling.

"You will stay away from Byron!" her father finally commanded.

"Papa, Lord Byron has always stood a friend to me." Lady Babs felt her cheeks get hot in spite of the fact that she knew her father had a point. "I won't gossip about him, and I won't give up the friendship. The subject here is *my novel* and how well my secret may be kept."

"Your friend? Well, let me tell you, young miss, Byron was responsible for bringing Lady Caroline low ... *ruined her* ..." Lord Waverly persisted and leveled a dark frown at her.

"I think Lady Caroline brought herself low. He did not ask her to make a cake of herself all over town." Barbara sighed heavily, and then added, "Papa ... we need the money, and Mr. Murry was kind enough to advance me for my book ..."

"And you are not supposed to worry about such matters! *I* would have found the blunt in the end ..." His answer was sharp, and his ruddy cheeks took on even more color.

"Of course, Papa," his daughter answered dutifully. The truth was that her father had turned to gambling after her mother had passed on three years ago, and they were nearly wiped out of funds. "My book will probably sell only enough to make up the advance ... and will soon be forgotten. The name I chose, Felix Gumble, is unknown and will be forgotten. 'Tis nothing to fuss about, and the advance will stave off the—"

"You should not be the one to have to manage our financial matters ..." Her father sat heavily in the winged chair at his elbow.

Their housekeeper, Maudly, appeared at the library door after having opened it a fraction and said quietly, "Count Otto Stauffenberg is here to see Lady Barbara."

Waverly was an old name, but theirs was an impoverished estate, and Babs knew that her father's hope was to marry her off to a wealthy peer. The count was a favored swain, and though Babs had him ever by her side, her father often complained that it was time she brought matters to a point. She couldn't though—oh, she loved having Otto about but only as a dear friend.

Her father leveled a 'look' at her and said in a hushed tone, "We will discuss all of this later." To Maudly he said, "Show the count in at once, and thank you, Maudly."

Babs looked up and smiled. The German count was tall, and built along husky lines. His years numbered some two and thirty; his hair was auburn and lightly laced with gray. His lips were ever curved with merriment and his light brown eyes sparkled with fun. He was a dashing figure, though not precisely handsome. His accent was only slight, as he had lived in England nearly all his life.

He had suffered through an early marriage that had left him widowed and quite rich. He had made a show of choosing to be at Lady Babs' side, for in

addition to the fact that they enjoyed one another immensely, they gave each other cover on the marriage mart.

“There you are,” he said brightly, the smile already growing wider across his round face. “If you don’t hurry, we will be late, you know.” He turned and bent a respectful head towards her father. “With your permission, of course, my lord?”

Barbara laughed out loud. “You say that as though ’tis my fault, and how could it be when I have been here waiting for you, sir?”

“Barbara!” objected her father, and then with his hand extended, he said, “Count ... how nice, yes, of course, you have my permission.”

“Excellent.” The count smiled broadly and then turned his attention to her. “Now go and get your spencer while I chat with your father.”

She bobbed him a curtsy and hurried off. What she would do without the count, she did not know. His constant attentions had raised her father’s hopes in his direction and had allowed her some peace at home and abroad. So many assumed she and the count would make a match of it, and it gave her a measure of peace because she was not interested in any of her would-be suitors.

It was a problem. She was already one and twenty, and her father was outraged that she had turned down every suitor to date. Otto was a dear friend, and thus far he seemed pleased to keep it that way. Their friendship served them both. He announced himself her devoted servant but made no push in that direction in private, and she was well pleased with the silent arrangement. She believed he was still in love with his late wife.

Re-entering the library, she slowed and noted with concern that while Otto chatted happily, her father was red-faced and seemed to be seriously annoyed.

“That’s right,” Otto said. “They say it has sold five thousand copies already. Everyone is talking about it. I want to pick a copy up on the way to the fairgrounds today. They say—” He saw that Barbara had arrived and cut himself off. “I say, Barbara, have you heard about it?”

“Heard? About what, Otto?” She held her breath, for she was certain she knew what he was talking about. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she waited for his reply.

“The new book, *Passion’s Seed*,” he returned in a tone of excited expectancy.

“Nooo ...” she answered hesitantly. Faith! What was she going to do? This was beyond her hopes for her book. It was a fearsome thing and, yet, so very satisfying. She couldn’t tell anyone, but it would be natural for her to show an interest. “What about it?” She purposely glanced away from her father.

“I am told that the author—whom no one seems to know—knows everything about the *haute ton*. Everything we have done for the last three, maybe two seasons. She describes all our antics in fine comical style, and

while it is most amusing to most, Lady Hester tells me she has certainly ruffled any number of feathers!”

“Really?”

“Yes, in fact, Lady Hester said she was convulsed with giggles when the author obviously described Lord Butterworth and dubbed him Lord Butterball.”

“Yes, but is it not fiction?” Babs asked, hoping to appear innocent.

“Oh, as to that, the names have been changed ... but fiction? Hester says, ‘not’.” He laughed and shook his head. “Come on then, we’ll pick up a copy on our way.”

Babs chewed her bottom lip. This was not what she had thought would happen. She had written her book for the growing middle class—not for the *haute ton* who would recognize themselves! She had never dreamt that any of the aristocracy would pick up a book by an unknown and then make it famous overnight.

She took up her straw bonnet and tied the blue ribbon under her chin. Otto smiled and said, “Fetching ... you have superb taste.”

She laughed and slipped into her blue spencer. She gave her black curls a twirl around her ears as she glanced into the sidewall mirror.

Otto stopped, ran a critical eye over her, and set her bonnet perfectly before he turned and bid her father good day as he offered Babs his arm.

She stalled him a moment and said hesitatingly, “Until later then, Papa ...?”

Otto added quickly, “Don’t worry, my lord. I will take care of our darling Babs.”

“How you will manage that is beyond me, for I tell you frankly I have never been able to handle that particular chore!” her father pronounced with a smile, both rueful and affectionate.

“Oh, Papa!” the lady objected.

“Go on then, go on.” He waved them off and then stood away from them as they left him to his own thoughts.

~ Two ~

LADY BABS' PAPA was certainly concerned and with good reason. If the *haute ton* ever caught wind that one of their own had betrayed their foibles, it would ruin her. He couldn't have that; the truth was that he thought the sun rose when she did. She was his precious, and he was at a loss to know how to protect her from her own wildness.

If she were found out—would they forgive her escapade as just that? No, he knew better. They would see it as a betrayal. How else could they see it? The book poked fun at them.

His only child, his treasure. She filled his home with laughter, and that had not been an easy task after his beloved wife had died. He had wanted to take a gun to his head and put himself out of his misery ... but Babs showed him how they could live and honor her memory. Now, now he had to find a way to protect her.

This was all his fault. If he had not fallen into debt, she would not have been pushed to write and sell the miserable piece of scribbling. His fault. She was but a perfect being, always kind-hearted ...

They would oust her from Almack's and whisper about her when she passed. She would receive the worst of cold treatments. He could not allow it. He would not allow it. He would say, if need be, that he wrote the book!

Lady Caroline Lamb had written a novel, and she had been all but banished from the London scene. She had been belittled, shamed, and gossiped about by those who had once fought to be in her company. Caroline had not left defeated, though, because she was, after all, who she was ... but he didn't want the *ton* to whisper about his good girl. Quite a different matter!

Certes! If ever he was caught in a muddle, it was now. She was his brilliant, daring, brave little puss, full of impulse. She was rough-and-tumble to a fault, but she was his, and in the end he would think of something. *He must.*

He went to his writing desk and sat. With a long and somewhat worn sigh, he took up a quill and started his letter. So, just as she had predicted, he was again applying to her for assistance. Lady Jane was a formidable figure whose presence in his household would most certainly cut up his peace, but there was no other way.

Even in the wilds of Romney Marsh her power wielded itself with the beau monde. *She would come.*

Theirs were very different natures. She took after their father and he after their mother, but their common bond was their great love for their name and his Babs. He sighed heavily; if Babs only knew what sacrifices he always made for her—perhaps she would be more circumspect!

Indeed, had Babs known to what drastic measures her father was moved to implement, she would have been astonished. This in spite of the fact that she watched Count Otto purchase a copy of her novel from a stack of neatly and prominently displayed copies laid out on a nearby table.

Who would know a mere slip of a girl had written it—who would suspect? No one, she told herself confidently.

She did, however, experience a ripple of excitement as she watched Otto flip through the pages.

“Aha!” said Otto. “This is a read!” He shoved the book into her hands. “You will skim through it while we take the drive to the fairgrounds and tell me what you think.”

She rapped his arm playfully. “Aha, is it, beastly man? Always putting me to work. You read it for yourself.” She pushed the book back at him.

“Ah, Lady Barbara.” It was a distinctive male drawl, and although the address of the man was decidedly languid, there was a certain masculinity that caught and held the interest.

Babs’ dark eyes opened wide, and the woman in her responded. She gave the gentleman a soft smile as she put out her gloved hand in genuine pleasure. Sir Edward Danton bent over her fingers but easily, deftly found the uncovered wrist and allowed his lips to linger audaciously there. His hazel eyes bright with something she could not name met her own, and she felt an intake of breath. He was so excitingly bold!

A tremble skidded through her body. That was not like her. She had some experience handling the London rakes, and her style was simple but effective. She would return their flirtation, but she did so while keeping on the move. She never gave an answer that could come back to haunt her and always kept it at a lively and shallow banter.

Most of the libertines she encountered took her responses in the light nature they were intended. She was after all ‘aristocracy’, and the general rule was *not* to dally too deeply with their own set—it could get a man married, and that would never do for a rake about town.

Sir Edward, however, was different. For one thing, he did not have the reputation of being a libertine. He was not even counted amongst those in the petticoat line. Sir Edward was, in fact, something of a dandy.

His chestnut curls were lightly pomaded and framed his lean, attractive face. His brows were finely shaped over his light hazel eyes. His lips were thin, his dress exquisite. His conversation witty, fluent, and interesting.

No invitation list was complete without his name. He was considered the

best of good *ton*, and his wealth and lineage made him a prize on the marriage mart. He broke the hearts of many mothers, for up until recently he had never displayed an interest in the misses presented during the season.

He made Lady Babs move closer, for he did not immediately release her hand; instead, easily, indiscernibly, he brought her to him, and his drawl lowered to a soft, husky tone. “Your obedient servant, my lady.” He turned to smile sweetly at the count, who was by now pulling a face, and said, “My dear count, one wonders how it is you manage, in spite of the deplorable habit you have of donning a gray greatcoat, to wield Lady Barbara on your arm.”

The large count started to bluster out a reply, but Babs put a restraining hand on his upper arm and said lightly, “La, Sir Edward, the color suits him ... I think, don’t you?”

“Yes, deuce take it, what is the matter with gray?” the count managed to demand.

“It is Napoleon’s color,” Sir Edward drawled, his sneer marked. “As nearly everyone knows, but then, I have heard your views lean in that direction ...”

It was a bait, just the sort of bait to set two men against one another. Napoleon and Wellington were in the very heat of battle in Spain, and sects of Napoleon sympathizers existed (though in small numbers) in England.

“Politics!” Babs stood between the two men and stamped her foot, drawing their full attention. “It is not the subject to openly discuss in a Bond Street Book Shop.” She lifted her piquant face to the count’s. “Now, as I recall, you promised me a trip to the fair.”

The count’s expression was victorious as he offered Babs his arm.

“Very neat,” Sir Edward whispered as she moved away. “My felicitations—you handle him well.”

To this, Babs frowned, and then she hurried with Otto out of the shop, all the while listening to Otto grumble about his greatcoat, the color gray, Sir Edward, and the dastardly inference Sir Edward had made.

“Do not allow him to annoy you. He provoked you on purpose, you know,” Babs said as she smiled sweetly at Otto’s round face.

“He wants you,” Otto pronounced after a moment’s silence.

“Do you think so? I do not,” she returned on a laugh. “He would not provoke my friends if he wanted to curry favor with me.”

“You are naïve,” the count said and clucked his tongue. “Just look at how he attends you. I have never seen him behave like that with any marriageable chit before. He is forever seeking you out and paying you considerable notice.”

“You are mistaken. Sir Edward is not interested in me. For goodness sake, I have been out two seasons, so why should he suddenly decide to take an interest now? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Just a moment, my girl ... as I recall, Sir Edward was in Greece during your first season. He doesn’t hunt—so he wasn’t with us when we all went up

to the riding country and the Quorn.”

“But I was introduced to him last spring, and I can’t remember his succumbing to my many charms then.” She laughed and patted Otto’s arm.

“Obstinate,” he said and tweaked her nose. “A man sometimes has to find his sea legs. No doubt he just wasn’t ready then ... but as he saw more and more of you ...”

She batted her lashes at him. “He was overtaken and his heart stolen ...” she said dramatically.

“Mayhap you just don’t want to see, but remember,” he said, wagging a finger at her, “he means to have you—*but what is worse*, I think you rather like him.”

“He is ever so attractive, Otto.” She sighed.

“I don’t like him. Dangerous fellow—not for you.”

“Why, do you think he will break my heart?” she asked curiously.

“No ... not that exactly, but he won’t make you happy. He is not for you. You need someone who will smile at your antics ... perhaps curb you a bit ... but never tame you.”

“Oh, Otto ... yes, I know, but who may that be?” she asked, sighing again.

“Damn if I know,” he answered, and both eyed one another and laughed.

Sir Edward stepped outside and watched the count’s carriage as it was driven off into London’s hub of traffic.

A flower girl waved a daffodil at him.

“Fer yer loidy, sir ... a ha’penny will do ...” It was a plea.

He eyed her a moment. She was dressed in an ensemble of ill-fitting and mismatched pieces of clothing. Her hair might have been a fair shade beneath the soot and grime, and she appeared a good deal older than what he assumed her age might really be. Thinking of Lady Babs, he reached into his pocket and flipped her a coin a great deal better than the ha’penny she had asked for but refused the flower with a shake of his hand as he turned away.

As he walked down the avenue, he found himself asking what in hell he was doing. He stood a moment, leaning on his ebony walking stick, and then absently proceeded to cross the busy intersection as he assembled his thoughts. He was irritated beyond belief. What was happening to him?

He wanted Babs to the point of distraction. He even found himself doing some odd thing because something in the back of his mind told him that she would like it, as he had just now with the child.

This had to stop.

He was his own man. Courtesans of great beauty had always taken care of his needs, and that had always served him in the past and kept him satisfied, but from the moment he had met Lady Babs, he had discovered a new side to himself. *It was not a side he wanted to embrace.*

He wanted to be carefree.

He wanted to continue to enjoy his life in the manner he was accustomed—and now, all that was shattered!

This young, innocent chit aroused sensations in his breast he hadn't been aware he was capable of feeling any longer. He had believed that part of him had been murdered when he was still quite young and innocent himself.

Yet ... he found himself forever seeking her out. He was considered quite a catch, and yet, she kept him at bay. Why? She was not adverse to his attentions, but neither did she encourage him. She seemed perfectly content to allow the dolt of a count to escort her everywhere, and yet it was perfectly obvious to him that she didn't mean to have the count. What was her game?

She was not even in his usual style. He favored tall, elegant ladies who were both sophisticated and worldly. She was a bit piece of bounce and jumble, a child really—but he damn well meant to wake up the woman in her. She was full of impulse, spirit, and something he could not name, and he realized that these things attracted him to her.

Still, she was also a bit too impulsive, and that he could not approve of at all. One thing was for certain, however: she was the most beautiful creature he had ever clapped eyes on ...

There was nothing for it. He had admitted to himself some days ago that he had to have her, and *damn it to bloody hell*, one way or another and by any means, this chit would be his.

Thus it was that he set about finding everything and anything he could about her. Quiet inquiries elicited bits and pieces about her. A tease with one of her friends just the other day told him she had a serious side and enjoyed, of all things, writing. Writing? Of all the things he had expected to hear about her, he had not expected that. Intrigued, he continued conversation along that line, and her stupid friend informed him that Babs had once published (while still at school) an article of some humor. He didn't like that at all, and it would not do in any bride he meant to have, but no doubt she had grown out of the vice now that she was in her third season on the town. And that was another thing. In her third season, and he had heard that she had turned down any number of eligible suitors. Odd. Lucky for him, but odd all the same.

In addition to these unusual circumstances was her friendship with the poet Lord Byron and his publisher, Murry.

Flitting thoughts brought his mind into focus, and he recalled the way she had run her hand over the cover of the new book everyone was talking about. As though she knew the author ...

Odd ... all very odd and certainly intriguing. All at once he found himself picking up the book and making up his mind to read it as soon as he reached his establishment, though he was not quite certain what this action would tell him.

~ *Three* ~

THE NINTH DUKE of Barrington's black, gleaming coach was stopped in the heat of London's busy traffic and he looked out into the hubbub, his thoughts in a tumble.

Hawkers cried out their wares and looked hopefully towards the impressive coach. One young and horribly dirty boy sidled up to the duke's vehicle and stuck an apple up with outstretched hand to its open window.

"Bright 'n' shiny it be ... jest right fer ye, guvnor." He grinned and displayed a mouth nearly devoid of teeth.

The duke tapped at his driver's box, stuck his head out the window, and called to him, "Hold up there, Harly." He turned to the boy and flipped him a hefty coin. The lad flipped him the apple in turn before calling out a parting thanks as he ran back into the hubbub of the traffic to try his luck again with another apple he produced from the ragged bag slung over his shoulder.

The duke watched the child for a moment before motioning for his driver to go on, turned to his companion, and handed him the apple. "Just the thing to keep you quiet," his grace said, grinning widely at him.

Sir Charles Liverpool looked at the fruit with some contempt and set it aside. "I won't be put off, Nick. It is time you reentered society. It has been more than eight months since your father's death, eight months since you left the Peninsula and—"

"And I am in mourning," the duke replied, cutting his cousin off with what he hoped was an end to the discussion.

"Don't pitch your gammon at me. We both loved your father, but—and I can say this, for he was more a father to me than my own was—well, damn, Nick, he would not have wanted you to bury yourself in the wilds and forget what life has to offer."

"Well, as to that, ol' fellow, you can't say I have done anything like burying myself in the wilds ..." The duke fleetingly recalled the last few months. "No ... wouldn't call it that at all."

"What, living up in your hunting box and running the countryside ragged with those hounds of yours ..."

"And what of the excellent ... er ... dinners we had afterwards this winter? Wasn't that putting aside our mourning?" his grace shot back, this time with a smirk at his friend.

Sir Charles paused and then sighed. "Well, they were very enjoyable little

fancy pieces ... to be sure, and having our old cronies join us, well, but you are evading the issue."

The duke tipped his dark beaver top hat over his eyes, sank into his leather-upholstered squabs, folded his arms across his chest, and said softly, "Do stubble it, my dear Charles, for you weary me."

"*Weary you?* Well, and so I shall until you agree to go into society with me this season. It is time you carried on the name ... you owe it to your father's memory."

"Low, very low hit," said the duke, not moving from the position he had taken. "Besides, I have you to do that for me."

"Me ... the devil you say! Besides, I haven't ... not looking to ... now look here, we are not talking about me. We are talking about ..."

"Me!" He lifted his hat ever so slightly from his face to look at his dearest friend and cousin. "That is your trouble ... sticking your nose into what I should or shouldn't do."

"The advantage I give myself for putting up with you," Sir Charles retorted and grinned. "Besides, I am your closest friend—who, if not me to save you from yourself," said Charles. "Look, ol' man, do you know what they are saying in London? They say *Lord Wildfire* is Wildfire only on the battlefield and that you have lost your touch with women."

"Baiting me, are we?" His grace clucked his tongue.

"Well, it is being said."

"Listen here, Lord Wildfire is a name my men gave me in my early days after we had a succession of victorious battles against the frogs. What do I care how London decides to perceive this?"

"Don't you ... care?" Charles returned sharply.

"Trying to get at me through me ego? Beneath you, Charles. No...not a lick."

They had by this time arrived in the heart of the buzzing fairground, and their coach came to a full halt.

Sir Charles dropped the subject and alighted nimbly from the coach without benefit of the small steps.

His grace followed, saying to his driver, "We shan't need you, old chap, for at least an hour, so do go off and enjoy yourself ..." He threw him a small leather pouch. "And here is a bit of the ready ..."

It was then that something occurred that captured their entire attention!

"No—Otto—don't!" Lady Babs cried, but in spite of her objection an impish gleam shone in her eyes. "We will call down trouble on our heads ..." she added as further inducement as she tugged on his sleeve.

"Ha! Since when did that ever stop us?" returned her large friend, and with that he climbed onto the first step of the contraption clearly inscribed for all interested individuals as a "catch-me-who-can."

Newly designed, constructed, and invitingly displayed, this black, gleaming metal structure stood fenced off from the hub of the crowd. It was London's portable steam engine, a mechanical treasure advertised as 'power subduing animal speed.'

"Do you really think it can go faster than a horse?" Babs asked in wide-eyed wonder as Otto managed to climb still higher up. Then hurriedly and with some concern, she said, "Otto, do be careful. I don't think it looks very steady."

"Faster than a horse!" He snorted. "It's too heavy ... too clumsy ..."

"OTTO!" Babs cried out on a squeal. "*It's moving!*"

"Oi ... oi say there, guv'," called out the watchman who had just arrived on the scene. "Ye shouldn't be up there ... Cum down ..."

However, it was at this juncture that the 'catch-me-who-can' broke away with a great, creaking groan and began sliding down the avenue. As it crashed through its temporary fencing, Babs screamed, and the watchman, evidently worried about his job, cried out, "It's the flash covey's fault, it is ... shouldn't have been on it ..."

"Yes, yes," Babs agreed at once, "but do something!" Seeing that the watchman seemed at a loss, she began running after the engine, which luckily had not yet taken on any speed. "Otto ... Otto, jump for mercy's sake ... jump off!"

Otto was looking around in some perplexity and a great deal of consternation. She realized he was worried about jumping off and doing himself some serious injury, and then she saw him reach for the steering wheel.

She also saw that he was in trouble, for the thing was headed for a massive tent.

"Yes ... steer it off ... hurry!" she said in encouragement to him as he reached for the steering wheel of the miserable vehicle. He would need to turn it away ...

They had read that this 'catch-me-who-can' was a model meant for display and that certain aspects of its design had been left unfinished. Unfortunately, one of these unfinished items was the steering wheel. It was not connected to anything in particular, which Otto discovered when he took hold of it and it came away nicely into his kid-gloved hands.

Babs gasped as her friend stood wheel in hand aboard an engine that was tilted downhill and picking up speed. Otto shook the wheel clutched in his hands, and his eyes grew wide because the huge tent loomed brightly before him!

Babs was beside herself. What could she do? Nothing—not one thing could she think of that would serve. And still she ran alongside as best she could, her skirts held high in her grip. Her surroundings vanished from her consciousness as she concentrated on Otto and the runaway vehicle. She was fully intent on staying with him and the horrible contraption.

And she ran straight into a rock-solid man.

She found herself in his arms, and the first thing she saw was that he was a perfectly attractive male specimen. However, as soon as that fact registered, she promptly dismissed it in lieu of her problem.

“Steady!” he said.

She realized he held her still and that in spite of the force of their meeting he had managed to take control and keep them both from hitting the grass. The sound of his voice, deep and masculine, seemed to tickle through her mind, and despite herself she was momentarily diverted.

“Thank you,” she said, genuinely relieved that she had not found herself on the ground. Then she saw that Otto had taken on the huge tent with marvelously outrageous might. “Oh God,” she exclaimed as she closed her eyes.

What followed next kept the crowd of spectators (of which Babs guessed there had to be an enormous number) in breathless awe. The tent of red, yellow, and blue released an anguished groan as the steam engine plowed forcefully into the tent’s central oak beam and came to a crashing halt.

Screaming hysterics were heard from within the tent, taking on frightful proportions as merchants and their customers began scrambling for the exit. With air-shattering might and in a domino effect, the tent’s remaining beams began to fall erratically to earth. Caught beneath the weight were silks, satins, pillows, china, and various other sundries. Also caught as the heavy canvas floated heavily down were the Count Otto Stauffenberg and one outraged merchant. All others had escaped.

“People are fools!” the stranger at Babs’ side exclaimed. “The situation calls for calm heads and clear thinking, but they run around screaming in mob form!” At which point, Babs nearly released a scream.

Charles, gazing at the spectacle, remarked, “I say ...”

“Otto!” Lady Babs cried in distress as she tugged out of the duke’s hold. “He is still in there!”

Charles had seen at once that the young lady his cousin had been holding in a firm grip was a friend. He exclaimed, “*Certes!* Babs—Babs, what the devil have you been up to this time, minx?”

“Oh thank goodness, it’s you ... Chuck ...” Babs dove at him and clutched at Sir Charles’s gloved hand. “*Otto is in there.* He might be hurt ... and what do you mean? I haven’t done a thing.”

Suddenly all attention was on the large gentleman emerging from the fallen tent. Otto had found his way out of the massive mess around him and stood brushing at his dust-covered body. His clothes were askew, his top hat was missing, but he appeared none the worse, though he still clutched the vehicle’s steering wheel. He saw Babs and waved happily at her.

However, he was soon involved in a heated argument with an irate

merchant who had scrambled out of the fallen tent.

Babs took in the scene and burst with relief into unladylike laughter.

Charles joined her in this, shaking his head to declare, "Of course, it would be Otto! How you two manage to kick up a lark everywhere you go is quite beyond belief."

"Oh ho!" returned Babs between gasps of laughing. "Look who is talking!"

"Well, at least he isn't hurt." Charles grinned, ignoring her remark.

"If you don't count the fact that your Otto fellow seems to be demented," said the duke with a grin of his own.

This set Lady Babs off laughing again. When she finally was able to catch her breath she said, "But it was an accident after all ..."

"They always seem to be accidents," returned Sir Charles, chuckling heartily as he watched Otto fend off the merchant.

"Excuse me," said the duke in a quiet yet strangely compelling tone, "may I suggest that we escort the lady away from ..." He looked around at the beadles coming their way. "... from all this?"

"Yes, thank you ... but what of Otto?" Babs said looking concerned..

"He will pay off the merchant and be done shortly ... but the duke is quite correct. We must get you out of this immediately." Charles offered her his bent arm, and although she placed her gloved hand on it, she turned to look after the count.

"But ... he will wonder where I have gone off to," she objected.

"No, he has seen me and will know I have escorted you away from the rabble just as I should. Come along, Babs. We'll see you home before someone recognizes you and your father gets wind of this escapade," Charles said with a rueful smile.

Babs looked from the duke to Charles as the duke took control.

"Indeed ... come along ..." The duke then parted a path through the rabble of people straining to have a look at the fallen tent.

Thus it was that the Lord Wildfire had his first introduction to the Lady Babs.

~ Four ~

GENTLY DEPOSITED WITHIN the confines of the luxurious coach, Babs was able to take stock of her companions and come to grips with her latest adventure—which her father would call yet another scrape.

Thanks to Sir Charles and his companion, she thought to herself, she had just avoided a bit of a scandal.

Her manner had always been open and forthright, and so she appraised, admired, and twinkled as her lips formed a heartfelt smile. Her first impression of Sir Charles's friend was that he was devilishly good looking. Her second glance told her that he was more, so much more than just good looking. He was probably the most attractive man she had ever seen!

His black hair that peeped beneath the confines of his top hat seemed to sparkle with midnight stars, so rich was its shine. His blue eyes were bright and full of laughter. He was tall, so very tall, and his broad shoulders were certainly Corinthian in style.

She became suddenly aware of her own appearance and adjusted her bonnet, which had fallen off center, and patted her own black curls into place. She saw that he was watching her, and this made her blush.

“What a dreadful muddle. I can’t wonder what you must think. Poor Otto, I mean, Count Stauffenberg ...” She frowned and clucked her tongue. “I feel a bit badly just running off and leaving him in such a mess.”

And then Sir Charles, who had looked back to see Otto flinging his arms about as the steering wheel was taken out of his grip by one of the beadles, exclaimed, “Dash it! Better ...” His words trailed off as he rushed back into the crowd.

The duke listened to Babs explain how Otto came to be on the runaway vehicle. As he watched the flitting expressions cross her beautiful face, he found himself momentarily mesmerized. It occurred to him that her skin was quite a lovely shade of cream touched with a flush of peach, and that her dark eyes were hypnotically alive, but what a little imp she certainly was! Most maids of her set would have been swooning to find themselves in such a tangle.

He was called Wildfire for many reasons, one of them being the speed with which he went through the ladies ... leaving them long before any

particular one became attached. His conquests in the battlefield and the ballroom rivaled one another to be sure, but as he watched the expressions flit across Lady Babs' face, he found himself intrigued.

"This Otto ..." he inquired gently, "a relation, no doubt?"

She giggled, and his eyes once again were drawn to her rosy lips that he thought a perfect shape. He watched as she composed herself and answered, "No, a friend—a very dear friend," and then quickly added, "Where is Sir Charles?"

The duke smiled to himself. Apparently she had been flustered if she was only just noting that Charles was absent.

"He'll be along any minute ... I'm certain he just wanted to be sure, your ... er, friend managed."

"Oh, Chuck is the best of good gentlemen," she said and then sighed with relief.

"Yes, he is, but what I am wondering is why you were in the company of a man who does not seem to be a steady individual. What friend would bring a lady to this sort of event and embroil her in—"

"Just a minute!" Babs snapped, cutting him off. "He is the best of good friends. He brought me here at my request because my father was otherwise engaged and by the way gave his consent, though that is none of your business."

"I beg your pardon," he answered inclining his head and thinking she was a feisty little creature. He liked the way her dark eyes flashed. Just who the devil was she?

Sir Charles appeared at the coach door. "Well, that's done, Babs m'girl, though what Otto could have had in his head to let you stand about while he took a steam engine for a ride!" He shook his head, climbed in, and waved off the objection Babs began to make before he turned to his cousin to say, "Nick, I took the liberty of directing your driver to Lady Barbara's town house. I hope you don't mind."

"Now why should I mind when you have been directing my driver all morning?" his lordship teased, finding himself greatly amused. "However, I hope you will take a moment and introduce me to this young lady before the journey is completed."

"So I shall, but not until I have warned her about you." He turned to Babs and offered, "This gentleman, who is also my cousin, is a devil, Babs, so I have my qualms about bringing him to your notice. However, as there is nothing for it ..." He inclined his head and said, "Lady Barbara Waverly, my cousin, his grace, the Duke of Barrington."

Lady Babs' eyebrow went up, and the duke couldn't decide if she was impressed or simply surprised. Her full lower lip dropped slightly, and he felt a sudden blood rush. She was damned enticing.

He took her gloved fingers lightly in his own and touched the soft flesh of her wrist with his lips. His eyes came up even as his lips met her skin, and he

found her delicate brows up and her cheeks aflame.

"You are sweetly named," he said softly to her and saw his cousin grimace. It spurred him on. "As sweet as the taste of your flesh."

"OH! Outrageous, your grace." She smiled ruefully and turned to Charles. "Chuck, you are certainly right ... he is charming enough to be dangerous."

He laughed. "Charles, I think the lady well able to fend me off, don't you?"

Babs laughed and said, "But you two are cousins? How is it I have never seen his grace during the season?" She looked curiously from one to the other, and the duke found himself amused by her openness of manner.

"Ah," Charles answered, "you are not only looking at one of London's former rakehells," he said as he smiled fondly, "but also one of Wellington's heroes! He has been off fighting in the Peninsula." He stopped at that moment to exclaim, "Ah, here we are," as the coach pulled up to the curbing.

It was Charles who alighted and turned to give Lady Babs his gloved hand and escort her to her front door, but it was the duke who managed to stay her with a soft remark. "This meeting has ended too quickly and with no promise for the future ..." He meant it as a mild flirtation but was powerfully taken when she answered.

"The future itself is a promise, your grace, for it is ever full of surprises." So saying, she turned and allowed Charles to take her up the walk and front steps to her father's front door.

Babs knew Maudly would open the door at any moment, and she hurriedly tugged at her friend's finger and asked, "Has he sold out, Chuck—your cousin? And what was a duke doing in Wellington's army? That doesn't make any sense. How is it he isn't married? He seems quite old enough ... he looks as though he might be nearing thirty?"

Charles laughed out loud. "Mind your manners, brat, and he *is not for you*, so don't worry your head over those questions."

"Oh ho! And you have decided that? Well, as a matter of fact I don't want him, but I am curious."

"He only recently inherited his father's title and estate. He is not married, and although he is old enough he had no wish to be. You may not want him now, but he has a way about him—he could steal your heart off before you are even aware he wants it."

"And yet, you like him a great deal?"

"And yet, I do ..." Chuck smiled at her as the door opened wide. Maudly appeared, curtsied, and ushered her charge within, but not before Lady Babs managed to throw over her shoulder, "Will I see you at Southby's soirée tomorrow night?"

"Indeed. I am looking forward to it." His eyebrow went up, and he added, "You seem somewhat overjoyed to hear it—I hope it is not because you think

my cousin will be there. Don't think he means to make an appearance ..."

Her smile didn't fade. "Why should I care about that?" However, she was acutely aware that she did care—she cared more than she could understand. For goodness sake, she had only just met the man ... but he was ever so handsome. She sighed to herself.

Charles stepped inside and said, "A moment please, Lady Babs ..."

She turned, and her eyebrow arched. Both were aware that Maudly hovered a few feet away.

Charles seemed to choose his words as he said, "Lady Babs, I feel it incumbent upon myself to caution you ..."

She took a step back to him. "Yes?" she said sweetly. She rather thought Chuck liked her, and she had taken pains to show him as carefully as she could that she only cared for him as a friend.

He sighed and wagged a finger. "The duke is his own man and goes where he chooses and has been out and about while you were still in the schoolroom."

She stamped her foot at him playfully and said, "Do not be wagging fingers at me and warning me off that which I do not want!" She giggled and added just before she gave him a little wave, "And you do not need to er ... father me, I have enough of a father doing that all the time." So saying she allowed Maudly to show him out and watched as her housekeeper rolled her eyes and closed the door.

Charles returned to the coach and sighed heavily as he climbed inside. "Sorry. Your day at the fair was ruined, and I did so want you to lose yourself for a bit in some harmless devilry."

The duke snorted. "My dear Charles ... or is it Chuck?" he teased and then proceeded before his friend could reply. "I did in fact, enjoy myself immensely, but tell me, are you courting the chit?"

Charles sighed sadly. "I ... no, she is immune at the moment to all suitors. I wouldn't stand a chance."

"Then you are smitten?" the duke asked curiously.

"Nonsense." Charles released a short laugh. "Me—smitten by a minx of a girl ... utter nonsense."

However, the duke thought he rather knew better. He gazed at his cousin. "I must admit, she is not in your usual style."

"And what the deuce do you think is my *usual* style?"

"Serene and lovely, soft and elegant, gentle and demure," said his grace at once.

"Rubbish." Charles laughed.

"So then, *you do* want her—this rough-and-tumble vixen?"

"I suppose I fancied I did ... but though she hasn't said so, I can see that she thinks we wouldn't suit," Charles answered and sighed heavily. A fist

went to his mouth, and he turned towards the window. However, he suddenly returned his attention to his cousin, and his eyes narrowed. "But may I also say that she is most definitely not in *your style*, Nick."

"You may say it, and as it happens, I agree with you. She is not the sort of female I intend to dally with. *I don't* break hearts ... at least not innocent hearts, and since when have I ever played with virgins?"

"Just so," Charles answered and then leveled a direct look at him as he confessed, "She seemed to think you might show up at Southby's tomorrow night."

Nick felt a strange flutter inside himself. "And your answer?"

"I told her that you were not the man to bat her eyelashes at," Charles answered testily.

"Well done," said Nick on a chuckle.

"Well?" Charles returned.

"Well what?" Nick answered, knowing he was irritating his cousin.

"*Damnation, man*, do you intend to go?"

"We'll see," was all the answer he was going to give. Indeed, his mind was already elsewhere as he tipped his hat to an old flame whose coach had just come up alongside his window.

~ Five ~

BABS' MIND WANDERED as she chatted idly with friends at the soiree. Friends? So many either engaged or already married. And her dearest friend in all the world had just recently been married to the love of her life; she'd told Babs all about the thrill of 'making love' and just what it really was like.

With spring in the air and igniting her imagination, that particular subject had filtered through her thoughts more than once. What would it be like to make love with a hot-blooded man?

She sighed, for in this season, more than any other, her body seemed to be coming alive. She felt intoxicated with the romance that spring seemed to offer with its scents and sounds. It was as though she were shedding the girl and embracing the woman that wanted control.

Two names had recently made headlines, and gossip columns were also abuzz with anything and everything about those two names. It was their daring and their offhanded mannerisms that caught everyone's attention. One was the poet Lord Byron, whom her father wished her to avoid, and the other, the arbiter of fashion Beau Brummell. Brummell was a valet's son who had managed to become the Prince Regent's friend and fashion's dandy king.

At that moment, Babs turned and found herself flanked by both of them, and as she considered each dear, she smiled warmly.

Beau held his quizzing glass up to his eye with a show of appreciation and said loudly enough for the nearby crowd to hear, "Stunning, my dear heart. That flame-colored gown fits you to perfection. Indeed, you carry it off beautifully with those black curls of yours, and those curls shine intoxicatingly as they frame your lovely face—I am ..." He bent and kissed the air above her gloved fingers. "... your very obedient servant."

"What of her dark, yes, Beau ... I should write an ode to her dark eyes ..." Byron said on a low, flirtatious note.

She laughed, rapped Byron's shoulder lightly, and wagged a finger at Beau. "Stop it, you two, or you will have my head swell, which would be most uncomfortable."

She looked across the room at that moment, and *there he was*. His blue eyes looked directly into hers, and she was startled to discover that she was capable of feeling missish. She tried to shrug off the sensation and inclined her head, allowing the Duke of Barrington a silent greeting.

She saw an amused smile light up his oh too handsome countenance

while both Bryon and Beau kept up a lively conversation beside her. She returned her attention to these two and tried not to think of the duke across the room.

“Nick, you devil!” Charles exclaimed, coming towards him. “I can’t believe you actually came!”

The duke smiled at his cousin but ignored his remark as he shook hands with his host, Southby, and made an outrageous remark to Southby’s latest flirt. He then followed this up by whispering something in her ear that made her catch her breath and fan herself. “Well ... if Southby doesn’t mind ...” she said softly, looking at the portly man beside her.

“Mind?” spluttered Southby. “Of course I mind, you naughty piece of fluff.”

She released a ripple of musical laughter and moved off towards the orchestra. Southby turned to the duke. “What’s this, Wildfire, stealing me wench right out from under me nose?” His tone was full with lively banter.

“I am persuaded that she is much too attached to you.” The duke smiled and turned to find the object of his scheme standing with Count Stauffenberg. “She is merely ... ah ...” The waltz he had requested was struck up. “Do excuse me, but my blood beckons.”

Southby and Charles watched him move in, bow to Lady Barbara, and lead her onto the dance floor for the first waltz.

“Damn, but what is he doing?” Southby shook his head. “Not in his usual style, the Lady Babs ...” He leveled a hard look at Sir Charles. “Best to steer him off. It just won’t do—”

Charles bristled in defense of his friend and relation. “You are out there. First of all, he is the Duke of Barrington with name, position, and wealth. Secondly, can’t make him do or not do anything he has a mind to do or not do. Thirdly, he is just amusing himself for the moment.”

“Is he, well then, if that is all it is ... no doubt leading her out so pointedly like this would have made her season had she not already been the sweetheart of the *ton*. I’m told she has a list of would-be suitors but will have none of any of them.” He sighed. “The wonder is she has turned ’em all away.”

“Aye, perhaps she just isn’t ready ...” Charles sighed heavily and added, “More is the pity ...”

Lady Babs noted to herself that the duke singled her out for *his* first dance, and that a waltz, which she decided was most significant. She wondered if he had in fact come to the ball to just to see her? *Impossible*, she told herself—foolish, schoolgirl dreams. What would someone so sophisticated want with

her?

However, something inside her tickled a hope, and when she looked up during the steps of the dance and discovered his deep blue eyes, she traveled to a place she never knew existed until that moment.

She tried to snap out of it. He surely was only amusing himself. His heart was well guarded, and she did not have experience enough to tear down his defenses. She was sure that even if she were to flirt outrageously ... she wouldn't be able to follow through. What did she know about such things?

She attempted to look past his shoulder and pretend his hand on her waist wasn't making her tremble. This proved impossible as his shoulders were so much higher than her eye level; she succeeded only in staring at the black velvet of his coat.

He called up her eyes as he whispered low, and his voice sent a thrill through her system. "You look enchanting, my lady."

"Thank you, your grace. You look rather enchanting yourself ..." *Oh my goodness*, she thought. *That didn't just come out of my mouth!*

He chuckled and said with a chin towards Otto, "I see your friend has suffered no ill effects from his experience yesterday."

She threw her head back and giggled. "Otto? Oh no. He is forever doing something of the sort. They call him *Deathwish* on the hunting field."

"*Deathwish*, eh? They should call him *Lucky*," the duke said on a quiet note.

"Well, that depends on how you view it all. One could say he was unlucky to find so many unfortunate situations—"

He cut her off, as when he bent to whisper in her ear she lost all train of thought and ability to speak. The softness of his husky breath near her ear actually made her close her eyes. "No, I meant lucky to call you friend and have you with him so often."

"Ah ..." She managed to sound cool in spite of her trembling knees. "Here it is, that deadly charm Chuck warned me about." She had to keep control over herself. She would not turn into a schoolgirl in this man's arms—she would not, she told herself roundly.

He laughed and said, "Acquit me, child. I meant the compliment, truly."

"Oh ... then you are *not* flirting with me?" she teased.

He cocked his head. "It would be my pleasure to do so, if I believed you wished it."

"And what woman would not? After all, you are a handsome duke with a worthy reputation," she said naughtily. "But then, what did you call me ... ah yes, *child*? So I suppose you do not think me a ... *woman*?"

"Not think you a woman?" His smile was devilish and devastatingly winsome. "Ah, but I see that you are the most dangerous kind."

"How so?"

"You creep up on a man, just when he thinks he is safe in your hoyden company," he said.

She laughed and said, "Touché!"

He twirled her one last time before he brought her up close, too close, only to stop and bow, for the music had ended. He offered his arm and said, "Shall I return you to your papa ...?"

"I think not ..." She eyed him coyly and indicated with her chin. "I do believe Otto has been trying to get my attention."

He stopped her then, for they were out of the crush of people, and said, "You would be in your rights, you know, to put up your chin and turn me up cold for calling you a hoyden."

"Would I? But ..." She laughed and said, "'Tis what Papa always says. You see, I learned early on that boys are able to do so many more famous things, sooo ..."

"So ... you very naturally adopted their manners?" He quizzed her.

She felt the blush burn her cheeks, but Sir Charles was at that moment closing in on them. She made the duke a small curtsy. "Thank you, your grace ..."

He smiled wide and bent low over her fingers. "The pleasure was all mine."

"Oh, I don't know," she answered roguishly, turning away to greet his cousin Charles, who was saying something about the country dance. "I had quite a bit of pleasure, myself." She gave him an impish smile and went back onto the dance floor with Charles. From the corner of her eyes she noted with no little satisfaction that the Duke of Barrington watched her departing form.

"Nick?"

He turned to the sound of a familiar woman's seductive voice and found Julia's dark blues warm with her greeting. He smiled, but he was not pleased to see her.

"Oh, Nick, I had heard you were in London and have been hoping I would see you." She placed both her white satin-gloved hands on his chest and lifted her tall and elegant body onto her toes, whereupon she placed a lingering kiss upon his lips. "Oh Nick ..."

"Julia," he said quietly as memories flooded his mind. She was, he thought, as ever, stunningly beautiful. "It is Julia *Hartly* now, isn't it?"

"Still smarting from that, are you?" she retorted with a musical laugh that grated on his nerves. She linked her arm through his. "Well, let us see if we can make it all better, shall we ..." She led him towards the garden doors.

Oddly enough, he found himself irritated with her flippant manner. He shouldn't be—he knew what she was about now—but, damnation, he was. He damn well did not want to go anywhere with her. How could she think he would after their volatile history? "It might be a bit cold for you outside, my dear," Nick said as politely as he could muster as he gave her bare shoulders a sweeping look.

“You shall keep me warm then, for outdoors is where we certainly must go.” She gave him a long, lingering look. “I have so missed you, darling.”

“Julia ... you haven’t missed me. You have been too busy to miss anyone or anything. Tell me what it is that you want,” he returned on a bored note.

“Now, now, don’t take a pet. Come with me ... and we’ll talk ...” she said with a short laugh. “You cannot still be angry with me? I did you a favor after all. You and I would never have suited.”

“Agreed,” he answered, and rather than create a scene, for he could see she wasn’t about to give up easily, he allowed her to lead him out the doors. He looked back as he stepped outside and noted that the Lady Babs was dancing with his cousin. He realized by the way she hurriedly looked away that she had seen him going into the garden with Julia. Frowning, he turned back to the woman he had once fancied. “Indeed then, as long as we understand one another, lead on, my dear.”

Her soft laughter was light and indicated her satisfaction, and that, instead of exciting him to passion as she had intended, irritated him further.

On the dance floor, during the machinations of a country dance that made conversation difficult, Babs witnessed the duke’s encounter with the beauty. She stared with curiosity and a twinge of jealousy. *What is wrong with you?* She asked herself, *What is it to you if a rogue of flirts goes about flirting? It has naught to do with you!*

When next she came together with Charles, she took his hand and dragged him off the floor with him objecting mildly at her back.

“I need something to drink, sir ...” she told him.

“Ah then,” he said, looking about and finding a servant with a tray of glasses filled with champagne. He snatched up two glasses and gave her one. “Your wish ...”

She laughed and got right to the point. “Who was that beautiful, tall blonde in the stunning gown—the one who went into the garden with the duke?”

He eyed her and grimaced. “Why?”

“Because her gown was exquisite ... and I am curious,” Lady Babs fibbed, which made her bite her bottom lip.

He eyed her doubtfully and said, “That would be Julia Hartly.”

“They are probably ... old friends?” Babs pursued.

“I would call them many things—but *never* friends.”

“Oh?” she said, hoping he would tell her more.

“Nearly became engaged, you know, but that is another story, a long one.”

“I am not running off anywhere, Chuck.” She smiled sweetly and encouragingly, hoping he would tell her more.

“Curious little pet, aren’t you?” He looked at her. “Why so interested?”

And don't tell me because of her gown."

"Because *I am curious*. You know me."

"Yes, yes, I do. Leave it be. It isn't my story to tell."

"Chuck, you can be one of the most provoking creatures I know."

"Next to you, Babs my sweet, I am a saint," was all he would give her besides the grape he found on a nearby table and plopped into her mouth.

Corrine Bretton groaned as the coach in which she was attempting to find comfort lurched and swayed over the badly rutted road.

"Auntie Jane ..." she said as she gazed and caught the eye of her stout aunt. "Are you certain that arriving in the dead of night at Lord Waverly's will not be too presumptuous? An inner voice keeps telling me that we should have put this off until morning."

"Nonsense! He is after all my brother," returned Lady Jane Bretton, who clucked and added, "Besides, *he sent for us*."

"Nooo," objected Corrine, "he sent for you and isn't aware that I am—"

"You are my niece, my dear late husband's blood, and I love you as I would my own daughter. Therefore, you are as welcome as I."

Corrine sighed and said, "Yes, Auntie."

"You are a dear, good girl. Sweet and placid of nature. Perhaps your hair needs a bit of styling, but it is the loveliest shade of auburn. Your eyes are bright, and there is a touch of green behind the hazel ..." Aunt Jane sighed. "Indeed, you are a catch but no one will know it stuck in the country as you have been. This will be good for you, and it will be nice for you to meet your cousin Babs. She is a complete handful but a dear child all the same. I can't think why I didn't throw the two of you together sooner."

"Because, dearest, I have spent most of my years in America with my parents, as you well know." Corrine laughed and then sighed. "I must admit that while I loved the bustle of New York and do miss it, this trip to London is very exciting. However, that sidesteps us from the subject at hand."

"What subject is that?"

"Why we must arrive in the middle of the night? Why don't we put up at a reputable hotel and—"

"Logical, but useless. If I know my niece, Babs, she and her father are out and about at some ball or other. Gadabouts the two of them, cut from the same mold, but darling creatures, really. They just need someone to guide them, which Babs' mother did very well until her death. Bless and God rest her soul." She sighed and then waved this off. "Never mind, we won't think about that now. You, Corrine dear, are just the one to keep Babs in line."

"*Keep her in line*? I will do no such thing—"

"She is in some scrape or other and needs guidance. You will set a perfect example for her." She leaned in and confided, "My brother loves me, but he can't abide my company for long, which means if he has sent for me,

something is terribly wrong.”

Miss Bretton put all this information aside and returned to the question at hand. “And still I do not understand why—”

“Oh pooh!” cut in Lady Jane. “I am not about to sleep between strange sheets simply because of the lateness of the hour. Depend upon it, Waverly don’t expect it of me. What he does expect is *almost anything* from me, and that is precisely what I like to give him.”

Miss Bretton gave it up. Her aunt had evidently made up her mind. She took to staring out the window as her aunt suddenly fell off to sleep. Street lamps began increasing in numbers as they entered the heart of the city, and Miss Bretton looked about with keen excitement. London, she was really in London.

Faith, how her life had changed in the past year.

She had been attending finishing school in Boston when she suddenly received word that her parents had been lost in a boating accident off the coast of Virginia.

One moment she was whole, and the next, she was falling apart.

She had been left with a small inheritance and a tobacco plantation in Virginia, which her parents had owned but rarely visited.

New York was the home she had always enjoyed with them, but she had no other relatives in the States. She was informed by her parents’ attorney that her inheritance also included a small estate Grange in Romney Marsh, near Rye, very near her aunt Jane.

Corrine wrote to her aunt, who immediately sent for her, and as Corrine had decided she needed family nearby, that was where she went.

After her arrival at her ancestral home, she discovered she and her aunt were near neighbors. She was happy to stay with Aunt Jane and allowed her estate manager to continue to keep an eye on her Grange home.

She had just turned one and twenty, and her aunt insisted she accompany her to London so that she could launch her during the season. Corrine wasn’t sure a season was what she needed, but she loved Aunt Jane and wanted to please her. And so it was just after midnight when they pulled up at Waverly House.

~ *Six* ~

BABS PULLED OFF her long white satin gloves and dropped them onto the central hall's ornate and rather gothic round table (a relic of the past and better days), and turned to her father.

"Papa, as much as I do adore thee and wish to please thee, we are not living in medieval times," she teased and planted a kiss on his cheek. She was hoping to coax him out of his grim mood.

"Nevertheless, daughters are still expected to honor their fathers' decrees ... even in these 'modern' times." He frowned at her.

"Honor their father's decrees?" Her eyebrow went up.

"What I meant to say was honor their father's wishes," he snapped.

"And you *wish* for me a loveless marriage?"

"Gammon, you know better than to play that game with me, Babs! I wish that you would find a decent man who can make you happy. I think that man is Sir Charles ... and my second choice is the count. Either one would offer for you if you gave them the slightest bit of encouragement."

"Papa, I am so very fond of both of them. They are my good friends, but ..."

"But you do not love them. *Famous*. You lead them on—"

She actually became so infuriated as to forget herself and wag a finger at her father. "OH! That is too bad of you. I do not do anything of the sort."

Their housekeeper opened the kitchen door and from the recesses of the nether regions came hurrying out, her plaid wool wrapper clutched tightly around her full and sturdy frame. "Lord preserve us ... Jed jest ran over here and is waiting in the kitchen, he is. He said to tell ye that Lady Jane's coach intends to put up there after her coachman drops them off here, he was worrit about it as Master Jack didn't know a thing about her coming."

"Deuce take it, I forgot to tell him. Right then, tell the lad it's fine ... tell Jack to find a place for the coach and m'sister's horses."

"Papa, what have you done?" Babs asked with some concern. "How could you, when we are at a wits end to keep above water, take on this additional expense for the season?"

"For you, child ... I asked her to come for you ..." he said quietly.

Babs sighed heavily and then clucked her tongue before she ran into his arms. "Oh Papa ... I do love you, and although I know you hate that I have ... written ... that I have ... well ... but it is pulling in quite a bit of profit ..."

“Hush ...” he said with a warning eye.

At that moment the door knocker sounded resonantly, and father and daughter stood stock still eying one another. Maudly shook her head and went forward to open the door.

At the door stood Lady Jane’s postilion. He promptly and correctly stepped aside to allow his mistress and her charge to glide past him into the house’s central and dimly lit hall.

In an aside, Babs whispered to Maudly, “Do we have guestrooms ready, Maudly?”

Maudly made a face, displaying her obvious disapproval about anyone arriving at such an hour. However, chin well up, she answered, “Of course.”

Babs loved her warm-hearted and very opinioned aunt, but they were forever at odds. She had learned in her early years that her aunt was a study in contradictions and could never be easily ‘handled’.

Her aunt was already throwing orders about to her driver and her groom with the luggage. Maudly had vanished and returned at this juncture with a tray of biscuits and tea from the pot she had already put up in anticipation.

“Oh, Maudly.” Lady Jane smiled at her genuine warmth. “How very kind of you, and allow me to say how well and fit you look. You may take the tray up to the Yellow room, where I shall stay as always ... so very kind.”

“Yes, mum.” Maudly made her a slight curtsy. “And Miss can have the room next to Lady Babs ...”

“Lovely,” said Aunt Jane.

Maudly had one more thing to say: “As it happens yer rooms are ready ... though I was not expecting you till tomorrow.” So saying she went towards the stairs, her body movements displaying her disapproval.

Babs witnessed this and had to stifle a giggle.

Lady Jane however did laugh and turned to her brother. “Well, here we are.”

“The devil,” his lordship said under his breath.

Lady Jane was already hugging Babs in her arms and then setting her apart to declare, “Heavens, Barbara ... you are quite a beauty!” She then waved this away and said, “Meet your cousin, my late husband’s niece, Corrine Bretton.” Having made this introduction, she moved off to link her long, lanky arm through her brother’s.

Their conversation was lost on Babs, for she could see that her aunt’s niece was blushing a bright shade of red. Babs gave her a bright, welcoming smile and took her hand to lead her upstairs, saying, “Come on ... a cup of tea and a biscuit will do you good—and me as well ...”

“I am so sorry for arriving at such an hour ... but Aunt Jane insisted ...” Corrine said softly as they went up the stairs.

“Yes, poor Maudly. I am certain she had already gone to bed, as we never expect her to wait up on us.” Babs smiled. “But no one can control Aunt Jane. It is why my father and she rarely visit one another.” She gave the newcomer

an open appraisal. "Now tell me, how is it we have never met before?"

"Long story," Corrine answered and sighed.

Babs opened the door to Corrine's room and said, "I do hope you will be comfortable here. It is a lovely room of mauve and greens, is it not?"

Babs stood back and watched her cousin with a soft smile as Corrine moved about and said with pleasure, "Lovely."

Babs put up a finger. "Wait a moment ... I'll go to Aunt's room and fetch us some little biscuits and tea ... Go on, sit and be comfortable."

A moment later they were seated and sipping tea while Babs set Corrine at ease by recanting an anecdote about her aunt in previous years.

This immediately set the girls giggling together.

Babs set down her empty cup and then went about the room, showing her cousin where to store her things and babbling on, hoping to set her at ease, for she could sense a certain reserve about Corrine Bretton.

"Now," said Babs, plopping in all her finery upon the large bed and patting a place beside her. "Take off your spencer and bonnet and be comfortable, and we shall have a very short and more intimate chat before I let you sleep."

"Oh, that would be nice, for now I am quite awake and not ready to sleep at all," said Corrine, finally taking off her bonnet. She placed it, along with the spencer she shrugged off, on a nearby chair.

She sat on the bed, and found Babs' dark eyes on her and asked with a smile, "What?"

"You look as though you think I am going to eat you alive." Babs giggled. "I am not such a terror."

"It is not that at all ... it is, well, I have been closeted in a closed coach with Aunt Jane all day ..."

"Oh my word! No need to go on—I quite understand," Babs said with a laugh. "So why precisely is she here? To curb my wayward ways?"

Corrine smiled. "I think so, yes ... are they wayward?"

"Oh most definitely. But, I want to know about you ..."

Thus, Corrine found herself spilling not only all her history but her points of views, her hopes, and her fears. The next hour ended with them hugging one another fiercely.

Corrine sighed and plopped onto her back on the bed. "And Auntie wants to launch me ... look at me, Babs ... I am too tall, too thin, nowhere as exquisite as you—"

"Stop!" Babs exclaimed, making her sit up. "Listen to me—you are beautiful! Just look at your hair ... a mixture of auburn and this tawny color, quite unique ... all it needs is a snip and a curl. I shall have my own dear Bess, who is very handy with such things, put it right. Your figure is delicious—and tall is what I have always wanted to be. We are going to Bond Street tomorrow and set off your height and figure with just the right things. I don't think they knew what they were doing in New York ... with such clothes ..."

Babs chin swept the air in the direction of Corrine's traveling ensemble.

"Oh, these are not from New York but from a small town near my finishing school ... and I haven't shopped for gowns in ages ..."

"Never mind all that. We shall set it to rights, and there is also the fact that you are an heiress to catch the eye of the beau monde—"

"I am not!" said Corrine hurriedly and with a shocked expression.

"You have inherited, have you not?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"But nothing—we *are going to set the ton on fire!*"

"Yes, but I don't want men to chase me for my inheritance!" Corrine wailed.

"They will, but you will lead them a dance, and you will see through them all to the one man you must have ..."

Corrine laughed. "I see now why Aunt is here—you do need a controlling hand."

"I do, I really do." Babs laughed. "However, I shall leave that to you, for I already adore you, Corry."

"Corrine," corrected Miss Bretton.

"No, Corry ... 'tis so very familiar, and that is what we will be from now on." Babs got to her feet. "To sleep ... both of us. Tomorrow will be ever so exciting."

"Babs ... what about you ... how is it you haven't ... you aren't ..."

"I am Lady Barbara Waverly. I am expected to marry ... or rather, sell my name to the highest bidder, but I have this little dream about marrying for love. And I shall, as *you shall*, but in the mean time, a little rumor to open the lazy eyes of the *haute ton* is just what we need, do you see?"

"No ... no I do not ..."

"Well, Corry dear, you shall ..." Babs giggled and left her newfound friend and cousin to her dreams.

~ Seven ~

BABS THOUGHT OF her new friendship with her cousin Corry as putting the lyric to the tune. They shared a kindred spirit, a sense of humor, and an appreciation of the ridiculous. She found that they were from the start able to view life from the same height, to turn to one another and laugh, or cry, and always see the other's mind.

Babs knew she tended to do the outrageous, the bubbling, the naughty, and the impulsive, while Corrine would observe it all from her seemingly placid exterior and thoroughly enjoy herself. Babs also realized that her newfound friend wielded a gentle hand of control over her. Babs was no fool—she knew she needed a calming hand—and so did not mind in the least; in fact, she welcomed it.

Babs also did what she had promised she would. A word here, another there, never overstating, never doing more than hinting, and the rumor began, so that when she told Otto her cousin 'had something of an inheritance', it grew upon itself in their circle.

Thus it was that the rumor came back to her that the lovely Miss Corrine Bretton was not only one of the season's new beauties, but she was *an heiress!*

And that was all that was needed.

Corrine's dance card was constantly filled, and the two cousins fluttered throughout society most enjoyably.

Babs did not see very much of the Duke of Barrington that first week after their first dance together. She did, however, bump into him briefly on two occasions in the park. Their first accidental meeting allowed her to introduce him to her cousin. After the second of those meetings, she turned to Corry and sighed. "Is he not ... the most handsome devil you have ever seen?"

"He is most certainly attractive ... but in a dangerous sort of way," Miss Bretton said thoughtfully. "Never say ... you are genuinely interested in him?"

"Interested? Oh Corry, more—much more. You see," Babs confided, "*I want him.*"

"Babs!" Miss Bretton squealed her objection.

"Oh I know what that sounds like, but I can't help it. I know it is quite impossible." She sighed and said on a low note, "You know, it is most unfair that men may go about flirting and kissing and ... and ... all sorts of things with impunity, but we must wait till we are married ..."

“Hush, you silly thing, before someone hears you.” Corry shook her head but could not repress a short laugh and a nod. “But you are quite right ... and it leaves us in a precarious situation.”

“Yes, for we must marry in order to enjoy the ...”—Babs twinkled—“pleasures of the flesh, and what if we don’t enjoy them ... with the man we marry?”

“’Tis why so many married women have affairs ... like Lady Caroline and Lord Byron ... and so many others who have married for convenience and find satisfaction elsewhere. I suppose that is our lot in life.” Corry sighed sadly.

“Well, it shouldn’t be, and I for one don’t mean to abide by rules made by men for their own selfish gain.”

“You are quite right, but there is nothing we can do ...”

“There is, and we should do it. Look at what that Godwin woman did ... with her publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In her work she actually indicated the position of women in society, most notably describing marriage, as legal prostitution. What do you think of that?”

“Babs, Babs ... your father would die of an apoplexy!” Corry laughed. “And I think that is coming it too strong, don’t you?”

Lady Barbara sighed. “Well, yes, but something must be done—if not, we risk being married off by our fathers to men we can’t abide.” She clucked her tongue. “And all this bother doesn’t really matter, because the man of my dreams—Lord Wildfire—doesn’t even really look at me.”

“Yet, I noticed that he is not adverse to your charms,” her cousin answered thoughtfully, and her hazel eyes twinkled. “And you certainly did exhibit them as best as you could, didn’t you?”

Her hand received a playful rap. “Horrid girl!” Babs laughed amiably. “And how could I do that with everyone in Hyde Park watching me speak with him?” She looked around and noted that it was the fashionable hour; it seemed all of London’s *haute ton* was out displaying themselves. She was heartily sick of it, and then with a flutter of her heart she noticed Lord Wildfire had just pulled up his black gelding to speak to another man on a gray.

“Look!” exclaimed Babs, exerting control over her fingers, which seemed to have a will of their own as they began to point. It took extreme effort to keep them at her side.

Corry noted a juggler working a set of ripe apples. Not far from him was a rather strange-looking gentleman balancing himself on the ledge of the water fountain whilst his friends cheered him on. “Yes,” she said, “Very odd ...”

“Odd—why?”

At the tone of surprise in Babs’ voice, Corry turned to see her cousin was looking not towards the juggler but in a different direction altogether. “Oh ...” she said once she realized what had captured her cousin’s attention. “I should

have known only the Wildfire himself would catch your eye.”

Babs blushed and rolled her eyes but said, “No...with him—the gentleman with him!”

Corry frowned and looked and said, “How, dearest, could I know who the gentleman with him is if *you* don’t?”

“No, of course you wouldn’t. He has been rustivating in the country. I have never been introduced to him, but he was often about, and I did notice him before it all happened. Yes, yes, his name is Sir Frederick. There was a tremendous scandal ...”

“Really? What sort of scandal?”

“I don’t repeat gossip like that. The poor man suffered a great deal over it ...”

“Too late—you have already told me there was a scandal. You must now follow through.”

“Not now ... here comes Lord Byron!” Babs said with a happy smile as she watched the poet’s approach. He was of average height, and while some women thought him handsome, she did not. His gait was hindered by a considerable limp. He was well dressed, but not in the ‘dandy’ style. She smiled to herself, for he appeared to the world as though he were bored, but she had enjoyed his company enough to know it was not that ... not at all. She gave him a welcoming wave.

“Oh my, Babs, your father would be furious. Talk about scandal—Byron has stirred up an entire volume of scandal. Why they say—”

“Hush,” cautioned Babs. “It isn’t his fault. He is totally misunderstood. He had a great affection for Lady Caro, who really is naught but a doxy, one minute fawning over him, the next burning his letters in public. *Idiotic.*”

“Yes, but the rumors about him and Lady Caroline Lamb are rife, and to be seen with him ... my goodness. Babs, they even say that he is in love with his half-sister, Augusta ... and ...”

“Rumors will always follow greatness.” Babs shook her head and then murmured, “Here he is ... Do not give him that sour face.”

She beamed and offered her hand. “My dear Byron ...” she said even as she watched Nick Barrington ride away and out of sight.

Sir Edward Danton had watched the Lady Babs during those first two weeks she enjoyed introducing her cousin to society. She and Miss Bretton had certainly stirred up the beau monde with their antics, but both seemed to be held in affection.

He looked into the matter of the so-called inheritance that Miss Bretton was rumored to have and discovered it to be a hum. He was very good at finding out what he needed to know. A magistrate’s clerk did not make enough to resist a few gold coins, and he discovered that she had indeed inherited the whole of her parents’ estate, but that it was modest.

He wasn’t sure how he could use the information he had garnered, but he kept it in his mental files nonetheless.

Another matter had the beau monde wildly curious. *Passion’s Seed* sales had continued to grow, and both the book and the mysterious author were the subject at many of the *haute ton*’s gatherings. People wondered why the author never made a public appearance or claimed ownership of the novel.

Whispers that it was a ‘cit’, or a merchant, abounded. For fun, Sir Edward said that he rather thought it was one of their own, and this took flight.

All this while, Sir Edward discovered that he was losing ground with the woman of his desires. The more he pressed his attentions on Lady Babs, the more she retreated.

He became thoroughly determined to press his courtship to a successful conclusion, for he had quite made up his mind she would be his. One way or another, she would be his. If she did not accept ... he could abduct her,

compromise her, and marry her, and if he had to he would resort even to that ...

It was at Lady Abigail's picnic that he managed to wheedle her into a little walk and began telling her how he had read *Passion's Seed*.

"Oh, and did you enjoy it?" she asked.

"I found it interesting," he said casually. "And you ... did you enjoy it?"

"I did, yes," she said adding nothing further.

He looked at her. "Have you any ideas who the author might be?"

"I? Why not at all." She bit her bottom lip.

Sir Edward had noted some time ago that when Babs spoke a fib, she would chew her bottom lip, and so he looked at her with interest. "No?"

"No," she answered and looked away.

"I do," he said simply, if only to tease a smile out of her for himself. It was very irritating to see her trying to appear casual as she looked back at the picnic area, as though looking for someone. She spun her head back, and her gaze raked his face.

"*Oh no*—I mean ... who ...?"

An absurd suspicion crossed his mind. He had learned that his lady love enjoyed reading and writing. He had learned that she had published an article or two whilst at school, and recently in a few unguarded moments she had expressed her love of writing. She had quickly waved it all off as nonsense, and he had taken it as such, *but now* ... his interest was fairly caught.

Later, after they returned to the party from their walk, he could not help but notice that she looked dissatisfied, even with her Otto and that other, Sir Charles, in attendance. He noticed her still looking down the wide, sandy trail that led to the road. Who had she been looking for?

~ Eight ~

THE RUTLEDGE BALLROOM was full to overflowing, and the evening hour still early at ten o'clock!

Babs noted all the women in their finery and jewels, candles sparkling, and people twirling about the dance floor, but her heart sank. Wildfire (as she had come to think of him) hadn't arrived. He hadn't been at the picnic earlier that day, and Sir Charles had said he rather thought he would be there. Now, once again her hopes were dashed as she saw no sign of him. She was definitely beginning to feel blue-deviled.

Beau Brummell strolled in and cast his comments on the wind, for he was at outs with the Prince Regent and was bold enough to remark upon it in public. Thus, laughter and whispers already abounded.

If that was not enough, Byron entered the chamber with his half-sister, Augusta, on his arm; a barely audible gasp went around the room. Things certainly appeared as though they were heating up, but not for Babs, who moved about restlessly and disinterested in everything.

She escaped the ballroom undetected and went for a bit of a walk from room to room, if only to work off her agitation and disappointment. She was just about to step outside for some air when she felt the hem of her gown being tugged and heard the unmistakable sound of ripping material.

"How clumsy of me." It was quietly said as a white-gloved hand reached out gently to take hold of her bare elbow, for she had tripped during the incident and was unsteady.

Faith! A shivering burst of energy shot through her at the sight, sound, scent of *him* so near. What was wrong with her? She really did not even know him—did she? No, she was blistering with desire and moving along on female instinct. What should she say? If Otto had ripped her gown, she would have laughed and called down abuses on his head. When she opened her mouth, absolutely nothing came out. *OH, eek—he must think me an idiot!* Finally she choked out, "Oh ... it is nothing ... really."

They both regarded the fine, soft material of her blue gown and the enormous length of material that had been yanked away from it to hang sloppily on its own.

He said, "This is all my fault—I wanted to catch up to you before you were out of sight and stepped forward too quickly. Please allow me to help you make repairs to your gown."

He was so cool, so collected, so ... oh so charming. His deep blue eyes caught and held her for a long moment, and she felt herself blush. "I ... I have some pins ..." She shook her sequined reticule hanging from her gloved wrist for emphasis.

He towered over her. His scent was masculine, and she felt light-headed. He spoke softly, only to her. "Pins, just what we need to set us on our way ..." A teasing quality coated his voice, and as she looked into those blue eyes she felt lost. What was wrong with her? She had to get control over her fanciful state of mind.

He already had her gloved hand and led her to a nearby door. He opened it, peered within, and exclaimed with relief, "I don't think we will be interrupted in here ..."

She followed him within and noted that he was careful to close the door after her. She felt herself tremble with anticipation.

It flashed through her mind that Corry would look for her. Here she was alone with the duke ... with ... oh, faith, she couldn't get past the thought and had to get control of her fluttering stomach!

The study they found themselves in was dimly lit. He took up residence on the sofa and urged her with a tug of her hand to do the same. She did.

He bent and held up the hem of her gown, neatly displaying her ankles. Once again, she felt the heat in her cheeks.

After a moment's appraisal he said, "This will take some work!" He frowned and added, "I do hope you will be able to see in this dim light?"

What had he said? He hoped she could see? Work? See—work, ha! *She couldn't even breathe*. She could feel her knees shaking, so it was an excellent thing that she was sitting. His nearness was driving her mad. This was absurd. He was a man, *only a man* ...

Their eyes met and locked.

His smile was quick before he told her, "I was hoping to see you this evening, Lady Babs." His tone was low and seductively thrilling.

"Why?" Babs was ever direct as she looked at him straightforwardly in a manner peculiar to herself.

He laughed out loud and surprised her by saying, "Damn if I know ... for I have been at pains to avoid you."

"Why?" she repeated as she realized that she had to breathe and did in fact take in a long gulp of air.

"You know why," was all he answered as he flicked her nose.

"Do I?" She shook her head. "I have no idea why you should wish to avoid me and then seek me out. It seems singularly odd ..."

This made him laugh once more. "Right you are, odd indeed, but I decided to give in to temptation this evening."

"Ah, so then, *I am temptation*?" Somehow she had found herself and dove right into the flirtation he had offered. This was just for fun. He meant nothing serious, and on that level she was able to respond.

He took off her glove and said, "You will need your fingers if you are to pin up your gown ..."

She pulled her fingers away, although it was not what she wanted to do. However, he was correct: she needed to repair her gown. She started the effort, but a moment later he took her fingers again; this time he put them to his lips and whispered low and hungrily, "You are more than temptation ... you are dangerous to a man's peace, but I am certain you have been told that before?"

"Have I?" she countered as she removed her fingers from his hold and returned her gaze to her hem. "I don't think Otto would call me dangerous."

"Perhaps not, but I rather think Sir Edward would. Indeed, from what I hear, you have only to move in for the kill ..."

What had he just said to her? What the devil was wrong with him? The duke chastised himself silently. He had been agitated all week trying to avoid the Lady Babs. He was too attracted to her, and it wouldn't do. He just did not tamper with innocent young women ... but finally he couldn't stay away and gave in to his need to see her again.

He had finally and at Sir Charles's insistence decided to make an appearance at the ball this evening. He had no sooner dropped his cloak and hat with the butler than he saw her leave the ballroom. Without thought, he followed her ... and now look what had come of it!

From a distance during the last few days, often when she had not even seen him, *he had seen* her, and he had noticed that Sir Edward Danton was in hot pursuit. Danton was very different than the count, and something about Danton forever hovering over her gnawed persistently inside the duke.

She looked angry now, her eyes glinting with sparks as she put up her chin and answered his remark. "Is that what you hear, your grace?" Her shoulders straightened. "How very entertaining, to be sure."

She had told him nothing with her retort, and he found himself amused. He put his finger to her chin and said softly, "Yes, I have heard that and ... other things ..." He allowed his voice to trail off as he baited her.

She was no fool. He saw it at once. She wasn't taking any bait from him. She gave him a hard look. "And do you listen to idle gossip, your grace—that I have but to move in for the kill? How very vulgar. I would not have believed you would repeat such a thing, but then, I don't really know you ... only the façade you present to the *ton*."

He inclined his head "I beg your pardon. I did not realize you had such a high opinion of me, and I admit ... that was very vulgar indeed. I do not know what possessed me to say such a thing ..."

Still very much in a pet over his words, she seemed about to return a scathing remark, but then she controlled herself and smiled sweetly. "'Tis only what my own father says after all ..." She shook her head ruefully.

He wanted to crush her into his arms. Everything about her called on him to touch her, and he found himself supremely irritated when the door opened and the count exclaimed, his eyes round and his tone touched with a bit of surprise, “*So—here you are!*”

It was precisely at that moment that Lady Jane took her niece, Miss Bretton, to one side and asked in worried accents, “Where, dearest, can that dratted cousin of yours be?”

Corry laughed and said reassuringly, though she was far from feeling confident about her words, “No doubt, she is just where she should be and with a perfectly good explanation.”

“Humph! Well, try and tell her father that,” snapped Lady Jane.

Corry said dryly but with a sweet smile, “I would, dearest Aunt, if he wanted to know, but I rather think he is too steeped in his cards.”

“Drat the man, ’tis why she is so wild. He never tries to rein that hellcat in until it is too late.”

“Auntie Jane!” Corry objected. “You cannot call Babs a hellcat ... *she is no such thing.*”

“Then where is she? Do you go off where you can’t be seen? *No*, but leave it to Babs to do so.”

“Well, she certainly is *not* ... er ... raising hell. If she had been, we would have already heard about it—”

“And that is another thing,” Lady Jane interjected. “Why are all these fortune hunters sniffing around you? It has something to do with your *angel* cousin, doesn’t it?” she asked suspiciously.

“Aunt Jane, Farley dotes on me, and he is plump enough in the pocket, isn’t he?” Corry stalled. “And there is Sir Charles, who has been very kind in his attentions, and there is Wendell—”

Her aunt cut her off again. “I ain’t a green girl, dearest. I didn’t say every man waltzing you about was after a fortune you do not have. I asked why men like Colonels Higgens and Chesterfield are forever ringing our doorbell, for they are *notorious* fortune hunters!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Corry with great relief. “Here comes Babs now and with the count in attendance, so you see all is well.”

“Babs ... I must tell you, you shouldn’t be seen alone with that man,” the count advised in a low voice. “It isn’t the thing. Do you know what they call him?”

“No, what?” Babs fibbed.

“Lord Wildfire, and it ain’t just because he was a devil on the battlefield, although that is where it first started ...”

“Oh, ah ...” she said, trying not to show interest. “I knew something about him being with Wellington ...”

“You knew that? Didn’t know you know that.” Otto shook his head. “It don’t signify. Next time you rip your gown and it needs pinning ... take your cousin, or *me* for that matter ...”

“You are a dear friend, Otto,” she said patting his arm.

“That I am ... care for you ...” He saw her expression and burst out laughing. “Not like that, you little devil ... but I do enjoy your company. Good fun ... and as I consider you perhaps my dearest friend—don’t want the gossip mongers flapping their tongues with your name.” He shook his head. “I am not in the petticoat line ... but very comfortable with you.”

Babs laughed. “Otto, I know that you find me useful as a shield. It is quite all right.”

“Nonsense.” He laughed. “You have many uses.”

She slapped him playfully and then said, “*Oh—oh*. Judging by Corry’s expression, we haven’t come a moment too soon.”

Sir Edward Danton was looking his very best as he entered the Rutledges’ ballroom. He thought that even Beau himself would declare his style *first-rate*.

His black velvet, overly long tails were the height of fashion, and Weston, London’s finest tailor, had fit it to his slender form with perfection. His cravat was tied with precision, and his chestnut curls gleamed around his handsome and angular face. He moved with ease as he walked towards his goal, stopping to make idle chatter with friends and acquaintances.

He had been anxiously awaiting the moment when he would take her into his arms for a waltz. It wouldn’t be the first time he had waltzed with her, and yet he found himself nearly breathless at the thought. It was absurd.

He was a seasoned sophisticate and had enjoyed his fair share of beauties over the years, but this one, this one bouncing madcap had captured all his thoughts and needs and desire.

As it happened, a waltz struck up as he approached her, but Otto had already led her onto the floor. He frowned but did not allow this to stall him as he squeezed through the throng of dancers and tapped Otto on the shoulder.

Otto had no choice but to relinquish his prize, and Danton looked down into her dark eyes and nearly felt stunned. She was exquisite. “Now, I can breathe ...” he said softly to her as his gaze caressed her full, rosy lips.

“Oh, were you having trouble, sir?” She flirted with him, giving him a flash of her dark eyes. “Air back in your lungs?”

He knew she was only flirting. He knew she enjoyed flirting, but this time he would show her that flirting with him was playing with fire. “No,” he answered. “Not quite satisfied, but I intend to be ... very soon.” His gloved hand took strong hold of her waist and squeezed lightly before he allowed it to

slide down her back and lightly touch her rump before returning it to her back.

Babs was shocked at his audacious touch. He had taken a liberty no other had ever attempted. She did not believe she had invited him to feel he had the right, or had she? Had she gone too far with her flirting? Perhaps so?

She had been distracted as of late. Her mind forever full with quite another man. All she could think of, all she could see, was the duke with his bright blue eyes looking into hers ...

She stiffened against his presumption, and Sir Edward laughed. “My dearest Babs, can it be you do not know what I have been trying to tell you—show you?”

“Just what do you mean, sir?” She really didn’t care, for she had a sudden urge to flee him and the dance.

“I mean to apply to your father and take you as my wife, my lady, my love,” he answered on a serious note.

She nearly stumbled as she missed a step and looked sharply at his face. He was most definitely in earnest. She lowered her eyes. She had no wish to hurt him ... or anyone, and she had not realized his attentions had reached this stage. She was sorry for it. “I am honored, Sir Edward, deeply aware of how desirable you are as a match, but I am also very sorry to have to tell you that ... that it is not possible.”

He looked stunned, and Babs bit her bottom lip. “Do you know how many women have chased me hoping to hear me propose?”

“I can only imagine.” Babs kept her gaze averted and wanted with all her heart to run. She had to be brave. She had to ease this moment for him, but his expression went from shock to anger, and a tickle of fear made its way into her stomach.

He suddenly grabbed her gloved hand and strode off the dance floor with her in tow. She did not wish to make a scene or draw anyone’s attention but tried as best she could to pull out of his hold. “Sir ... *please stop* ... Sir Edward, what do you think you are doing?”

He stopped, turned, and glared at her. “Lady Babs, you will accompany me into the garden, for I mean to talk to you in private ... *now!*”

Perhaps she owed him this? she wondered as she allowed him to lead her out the garden doors, but she felt miserable and kept her eyes lowered.

Torches were lit everywhere, and she pulled out of his grip and remained near the garden doors. “You may talk here ... I am not going alone with you any further.”

He turned on her then, and his face was a mask of white fury. “Lady Barbara, I mean for you to carry my name. Do you actually say me nay?”

“I would make you miserable, sir,” she tried reasonably. “We certainly would not suit.”

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “What new kick is this?”

“Please, Sir Edward, I have enjoyed our friendship, your escort on many occasions, but I am persuaded you would not be happy with me as your wife. I am not at all dutiful. In time, what you think intriguing would pall on you ... and become tiresome.”

“Is that what is worrying you?” He laughed. “Nonsense. I want you, Babs. Haven’t I convinced you of that?”

“Stop ... oh, do stop ...” Babs was at a loss suddenly and wanted to escape. He wouldn’t listen. There was nothing else she could say without hurting him, and she had no wish to hurt him.

“No, darling, you would never pall on me, and in time you will learn to behave as you ought—”

She cut him off. “Behave as I ought? You see ... you don’t know me. I am behaving as I ought. I cannot marry where my heart is not engaged ... I am sorry, Sir Edward. I ... I do not love you.”

Babs realized suddenly that Sir Edward did not take rejection well. He grabbed hold of her and shouted as he bent to force a kiss on her, “Then you will learn to love me ... you will learn very well!”

“Let me go!” Babs cried, thoroughly distressed. “You are hurting me ...”

“*I suggest,*” came a strong male voice, “you release the lady at once!”

Babs turned to find the duke standing there, clenching and unclenching his fist. His jaw worked with his controlled anger, and he looked his name, Wildfire. Instinctively and without realizing what she was doing, Babs broke free of Danton’s suddenly lax hold and ran the few steps to the duke.

He smiled reassuringly at her as he bent his arm for her hand. “My lady, allow me to escort you to your aunt, who has I know been quietly worried about your direction.”

“Nick!” Sir Edward called furiously. “This is none of your affair, and you would be advised to stay out of my way.”

“Ah, Ned, you know me better than that,” was all the response the duke gave him as he led Babs back into the ballroom.

“Will you tell me, little terror, why you went out there with him?”

She put up her chin. “You were most kind to extricate me ...”

“So then indulge me by answering my question,” he insisted.

“I am a terrible, awful thing. I am ashamed to admit that I must have led him to believe ... I did not know ... but it is in part my fault ...”

“Ah, and my Charles is quite correct,” said the duke.

“Is he? What does Chuck have the good fortune to be correct about?”

“About you. He says you are a handful, and, my little terror, so you are, but here is your aunt, and I think she means to have a go at you.” So saying, he gave her a low bow and backed away, an amused glint in his eyes.

Babs turned to face her aunt.

~ Nine ~

THE LOBBY OF the House of Commons was in an uproar. Corn Laws were the subject of heated debate. The deplorable state of the economy had to be discussed, and, to a man, opinions were rife and loud.

The Duke of Barrington sighed as he looked around. He was waiting for his cousin, Charles, and Mr. Wethering to arrive, as Wethering was due to speak.

Eventually, he and Charles would make their way over to the House of Lords, and they would take their seats, but first he wanted to discuss his own intended speech with his friend.

The buzz of voices suddenly got louder.

Tempers seemed to be on the rise.

He was damned frustrated with politics. All talk no action.

On the battlefield it was the opposite.

While the duke mused on these thoughts, a man hurriedly made his way into the House of Commons. His name was Bellingham, and the duke's eyes narrowed when he saw him. He didn't know what it was, but all at once he had a bad feeling.

Bellingham had a personal grievance that the duke had heard about on more than one occasion. Looking at the man now, it appeared his grievance had boiled over.

Wildfire knew that Bellingham had been allowed to sit in prison in Russia. He had taken the only course open to him as an Englishman and appealed to his representative stationed there at the time—Granville Leveson Gower—who had done nothing to help him.

During the poor man's incarceration he had gone bankrupt, and he'd returned to England a broken man. Nick felt heartily sorry for him, but ... now ... now something was up. Nick took a step forward, not sure what he should do. A state of frenzy filled the air around the man, and Nick actually felt the vibes across the room. Did no one else notice?

He was too far away from him, but nonetheless he started pushing through the crowd of men standing about in small cliques. The duke heard him ask for Gower only to be told, "Not here ..."

"But he is due to speak," Bellingham answered and then looked about as though crazed.

The duke saw it at once and started towards him, his hand outstretched.

“Well,” said Bellingham. “Here is England ... here is our prime minister ...” He waved the pistol he had shrugged out from under his cloak and brought it into line.

Charles had reached Nick by that time, but Nick had no time for him as he pushed through trying to reach Bellingham. “*No! Hold!*” he shouted, catching more than one man’s notice. However, it was already too late. The noisy room was brought to total quiet by the reverberating boom of Bellingham’s exploding pistol.

The prime minister, the Right Honorable Spencer Perceval, lay still and bleeding on the marbled floor.

The Duke of Barrington was aptly named, because like wildfire he was everywhere at once, doing everything. He had the gun in hand; he had Bellingham. He managed to instruct two sturdy gentlemen to take over in that regard as he bent to look over the prime minister’s wound.

Wildfire called for a doctor and for the beadles, sending men scattering to do his bidding. He took command and brought the hubbub into order around him.

But for the prime minister of England it was over, because he lay dead ...
The duke closed his eyes. “This is a tragic affair ... *despicable* ...”

It was natural and quite inevitable that the prime minister’s murder would dominate drawing room conversations, and it did for some days afterwards. Tales of the duke’s quick-mindedness and ability to lead during a crisis were applauded and came to Lady Babs’ ears. She felt a swelling of pride, though why she should, she told herself, was more than she could understand.

Otto stood, his hands clasped at his back as he spoke to Lord Waverly and his sister, giving a lengthy discourse on the numerous problems that the prime minister’s murder had created.

Babs’ father tried to maintain a quiet interest, but his daughter (with a silent giggle) could see he was about to nod off.

Lady Jane would interrupt him from time to time to add her own epitaphs to the horrible events that had taken place, but Babs, in spite of her usual good humor, sighed and looked away.

Three days had passed since the Rutledge ball, and Babs was in a sorry state. She had not seen the duke since that night. Her mind was boggled with frustration and something else she could not name. *What is happening*, she asked herself. What was she feeling? She was too old for schoolgirl crushes ... this was so much more.

Corry touched her hand, for she was fully aware of why Babs was in such a restless state. “Don’t, Babs ... it is not like you to pine ...”

“But, Corry ... he showed an interest ... and yet ...?”

“My dear sweet friend, he is not the sort to feel a lasting—”

“You don’t know him,” Babs protested.

“Do you?” Corry attempted logic.

Babs put a hand over her heart. “In here I do ... but you are quite right, and I am being foolish.”

The drawing room door opened at that exact moment, and Maudly surprised the assembled group by dropping into a bobbing curtsey and saying in regal terms, “His grace, the Duke of Barrington, Sir Charles Liverpool, and, oh dear, I’ve forgotten t’other one’s name.”

The duke, just behind her at the double doors, grinned and bowed his head winningly to say with some amusement, “Good for you, my dear. If you are to forget anyone’s name, it might as well be Freddy’s here.”

“That’s right,” said Maudly smiling widely at the duke and dropping another curtsey. “Sir Frederick Douglas.”

The duke’s eyes were on Babs as she jumped to her dainty feet. Her morning gown of yellow fitted her body to perfection, and that body ... he couldn’t stop from gazing at it. He found himself almost hypnotized as he looked at her from the top of her beautiful, dusky curls set high on her head, and damn, he liked the way they bounced around her piquant, exquisite face! His gaze traveled down her slender neck to those full, luscious breasts, heaving with her breath, above the empire bodice of her pretty morning dress. Those sweet, full, and plump, and, hell, what the hell was he doing? He was in her drawing room ... and with her father present! *Bloody hell!*

He looked to her father as he and his companions exchanged greetings with him, and went through the usual amenities, but he could see her out of the corner of his eye, standing there like a goddess ...

He paid his respects then to Lady Jane, bent over Miss Bretton’s hand, nodded to Otto, and finally was able to move to Babs. He bent his head to her proffered and ungloved hand. He allowed his lips to linger a bit longer than was customary. When he brought his head back up, he found her sparkling dark eyes; he felt as though the air had been instantly sucked out of his lungs.

“You are even more enchanting in the full light of day, my lady ...” he said softly and cursed himself as an idiot. What stupid, inadequate words.

She released a short laugh. “And *you* are, as ever, all too charming to believe.”

He smiled, for he could see the skepticism in her eyes. Damn, but he admired her, and it was for more—a sight more—than her beauty. She could be trouble, she was trouble, *bloody hell, he was in trouble.*

He played the game to cover his tension. “But, sweet beauty, how can you doubt the truth of the words ... even though they are spoken from *my* lips?”

She clapped her hands. “Very good, but ...” Her finger very naughtily, saucily went upwards and touched his nose. “Coming from you, a lady could never be sure just what truths lie behind the words.”

He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to shove his tongue into her

mouth and taste her. Hell and fire, he wanted to ram his cock deep inside and make her his own. Why the devil had he come here to torture himself? He couldn't do any of those things, so what had moved him to visit her ...

The smile she wrung from him was driven by his desire. The voice he spoke to her with was infused with heat. His words were low and meant only for her. "The truth is—I *dream of you, of what it would be like ...*"

She nearly gasped with surprise and pleasure, for she had no doubt about what he meant. She might be a virgin, but she wasn't stupid. She was not, however, taken aback. "Do you, your grace ... and are they pleasant dreams?" She knew she was being bold and audacious, and it was thrilling.

"I wish I could show you ..." he whispered.

Lady Jane interrupted their tête-à-tête at that moment by calling out, "Dearest Babs, come help your cousin—she is surrounded by gentlemen!" It was her way of getting her wayward niece away from the duke, whom she was sure could only have lascivious intentions!

However, even as she spoke, Maudly came in with refreshments, and Lady Jane got up from her chair to oversee this, clucking her tongue as she instructed Maudly who in the room required what, giving Babs the opportunity to respond to his outrageous remark. "I am certain you do ... after all, you did not get your title of Wildfire for holding back ... did you?"

The duke moved in on her. She was saucy and playing with fire, for he was heated up and beginning to wonder how innocent she was. She flirted beyond the norm for an innocent maid. He whispered, "Why is it you have such a low opinion of me? Has someone been spreading false rumors?" He took her hand and kissed her fingertips.

She gently pulled them away as she glanced towards Lady Jane and then returned her dark eyes to him. She drew on all his senses. He felt alive in her company. What was it about this chit that drove him to such extremes?

"I don't listen to rumors. They never serve to further the truth. I draw my conclusions about you ... *from you*," she said softly and lowered her gaze.

"Then, there is only one thing to be done," he answered with a mock sigh.

"Oh?" Her dark brow was arched.

"*Reform me*, my angel." His hand went playfully to his heart. "Make of me what you will, for I am your slave."

She laughed out loud. "Oh, do stop! I am persuaded that there isn't a female alive who could reform you—or enslave you."

He was suddenly serious as he looked down at her. "Right you are, my Lady Babs, and how wise of you to see it."

"And do you miss the wilds of America?" Sir Frederick asked Miss Bretton, as he had just learned from Lady Jane that Corry had spent most of her years there.

Corry eyed the newcomer. A certain attractiveness characterized his

boyish smile. She recognized him at once as the gentleman Babs had pointed out when they were in the park the other day. There was a scandal attached to his name? She fleetingly wondered what it could be—he seemed so very pleasant.

He asked the question, but she couldn't help but notice a distant, vagueness in his light blue eyes, a sure sadness. She was a bit weary of the subject, as she had had to answer this question so many times; however, she smiled kindly at him and answered a bit differently this time, going into more detail than she had been wont to do. "Sometimes, yes, when I think of hunting ..."

His gaze sharpened. "Hunting? Fox hunting? In America?"

She laughed. "Why, yes. My father kept a kennel on our plantation in Virginia, and I loved helping him take the hounds into the field and train them off deer and onto fox."

"Virginia? Red fox?" Clearly, Sir Frederick was amazed.

"Indeed, marvelous red foxes and grays as well. Crafty and full of sport." She leaned in and whispered, "We never allowed it to go too far ... we weren't in it for the blood, simply for the chase."

"Ah, you let the fox get away? Not good for the hounds, you know ..."

"Well, most of the time the fox would run to earth, and we didn't keep a Jack Russell to dive in after them, you see." She eyed him. "I take it you are an avid fox hunter?"

Otto overheard and joined in. "*Fox hunting*? What's this? What are you arranging, Freddy ... we ain't in season yet."

Corry laughed. Otto had very quickly adopted her along with Babs and treated her very much like a sister. "No ... no ..."

Babs looked their way and was drawn into the conversation, though she was still thinking about the duke's last remark. He was warning her off himself. And she knew why—because *he simply was not in earnest*.

"How you can switch in midstream from the prime minister's murder to fox hunting is beyond reason, Count," Lady Jane said, shaking her head.

"What is murder—even the prime minister's—when compared to the only worthwhile sport ever discovered by man!" Otto responded with feeling.

"I feel I should say, 'Amen'," Sir Charles said with a laugh.

That was all that was needed. Babs laughed to herself as she sat back, watched, and listened. It was a room full of fox hunters all ready to embark upon the sport's merits, its flamboyant extremes, its disadvantages, and its glories. So the conversation went until Otto, who knew only vaguely that Babs enjoyed scribbling of sorts, surprised her and said, "That would make a good story, Babs. You should write it."

She blushed; she hadn't realized he had retained that bit of information. She also felt the duke's blue eyes appraise her, and she returned quickly, "Oh,

Otto. Why me? I only dabble with the pen, after all.”

“Nonsense—there was that piece you did not so long ago for the *Chronicle*, and it was very entertaining. I’d wager a monkey you would have the readers splitting their sides if you recounted some of our hunting adventures on paper.”

Babs never thought she would be thankful for Sir Edward’s interruption, as he had quite worried her the other night, but it was at this juncture that he silently did indeed win her thanks.

“How cozy you all look,” Sir Edward Danton said from the open doorway. “I do hope I am not interrupting a private party.” He smiled lazily as though thoroughly bored. “There was a crisis of sorts in the nether regions of the house, and I told your poor housekeeper that I would show myself in.” He had already bent over Lady Jane’s proffered hand and turned to give Babs’ father a respectful greeting before he even acknowledged Lady Babs’ presence.

Lady Jane looked him over with mild disapproval and said, “Private party? Nonsense, and do stop quizzing us with that glass of yours! What sort of crisis?”

“I am sure I do not know,” Sir Edward said, dropping his glass as he approached Babs, who stood a bit apart from the duke and eyed him warily.

He approached, and she did not want to be rude so she allowed him her hand. He bent over it. “My lady ...” he said softly.

She felt as well as noted the hard look in his eyes. She rather thought he intended mischief because of her refusal to accept his courtship, and she frowned as she worried about it for a moment.

The duke moved closer to her, but it did not deter Sir Edward as he unbent and said, “Ah, my lady Babs, you are as ever, exquisite and have quite made my day.”

“You are ... too kind,” she said carefully.

“I suppose you all are aware that the Prince Regent is in a thither over poor Spence’s murder,” Sir Edward remarked nonchalantly.

“Well,” Otto said gruffly, “I don’t blame him in this instance. Everything must be in a muddle. Whigs and Tories at each other’s throats ... the Hartfords moving in ...”

Sir Charles clapped Otto on the back and frowned darkly. “As you say, ol’ boy. Everything is in mass confusion, and there is the third coalition to think about.” He turned to Lord Waverly. “Do you come with us then, my lord, for Nick and I must trudge over to Carlton House.”

Babs’ heart sank at the thought the duke was leaving. She also suddenly realized the duke had dropped by *not* to see her at all. Because of the planned meeting at Carlton House, the Prince Regent had requested they bring her father along. It was a most lowering notion. His flirtation was only that—a mild flirtation. Hadn’t he even warned her not to take him seriously?

However, then he threw her back into a silent flutter as he made her a bow

and said low and sweetly, "Until tonight."

"Tonight?" she asked.

"Do you not go to the masquerade in Vauxhall Gardens?" he asked, showing some concern.

"Yes, but I never dreamt you would be there," she answered and realized her voice displayed the delight she felt.

"Ah, yes, you are quite correct. Ordinarily, it is just the sort of affair I avoid, but I shall not avoid it tonight."

She felt his deep blue eyes look into hers with such profound meaning that a flash of heat rushed through her veins.

Sir Frederick leaned in to her, drawing her attention, and asked, "Does Miss Bretton accompany you to the Gardens tonight?"

"Of course," Babs said at once and noted to herself that her cousin had made another conquest.

"Then so shall I."

Babs waved her father and the three gentlemen off, even as Lady Jane stood up and made it clear in her forthright manner that she expected the count and Sir Edward to leave as well. Babs smiled to herself as Sir Edward attempted to linger and Lady Jane offered her hand, saying, "So good of you to call, Sir Edward."

He had no choice but to take the offered extremity and say softly, "So good of you to have me." With this he cast Babs a lingering look and departed, with Otto sighing and saying, "Right then, Babs, I will see you tonight."

Lady Jane turned to her charges. "Well?"

The girls regarded one another and then their aunt doubtfully. "Well what, Auntie Jane?" Babs asked.

"I want to know if you, Babs, mean to have that Sir Edward, and don't play your games. I want an honest answer, for I can't say anything against the match—it would be a good one—but for the fact that I cannot like him."

"Precisely how I feel," said Babs with a twinkle.

Lady Jane turned to Miss Bretton. "And you, young lady ...?"

"No, I don't want Sir Edward either," Corry said, her own eyes laughing.

"Widgeon. What of this Sir Frederick, who seemed particularly interested in you?"

"I have only just met him, Auntie Jane, and have no opinion on the matter."

"Humph," said Lady Jane.

~ Ten ~

BABS LOOKED AROUND and felt more than the usual excitement. Vauxhall was, to be sure, a fairyland place alight with torches, crystals, and the latest gas lamps. Everywhere flowers were in perfect design with the landscaping. Fountains bubbled, lovers strolled, music flowed, and London's high and low in society found their respective haunts and places of revelry at Vauxhall.

However, it was something else altogether that had Babs brimming over with anticipation. His grace, the Lord Wildfire, had said he would be there, and she expected that he would seek her out.

She and Corry had been told by Lady Jane not to wander off, but at their first opportunity (when she was busy in conversation with one of her dearest), that was exactly what they did.

It was all so exciting. People's identities were hidden from discovery by their masks and hooded dominos. It seemed to afford all with a sense of freedom to do as they pleased.

"Babs ... Babs ... this is like paradise ..." Corry said on a hushed note of awe. "Or at least someone tried very strenuously to make it appear so."

Babs laughed. "Oh, Corry, I love the way you are forever summing things up. I had forgotten you have never been here before." Something caught her eye, and she pointed her chin in its direction. "Look there, in the arbor. They are about to play the harps!"

"Babs!" Corry said anxiously enough that her cousin turned to look up at her.

"What?"

"There are three rogues at our heels."

"Hmm, yes, I know. Ignore them," Babs said, seemingly unconcerned.

"So I should be pleased to do, but one is very nearly at my elbow." She looked up at the large brute who was now leering down at her.

"Evening, m'lovely," said the huge fellow, and though he was a well-dressed man, he had a definite odor of gin about him.

Babs noted at once from the wild gleam in his eyes that the man was certainly in his cups. She took Corry's trembling hand in hers as the man called out to his friend, "Eh, George ... what say we have us a look under their masks?"

Babs smiled as sweetly as she could at the man named George as he

began to reach and shook her head. “*Not* a good idea, George. You see, if you were tempted to put one finger on me or my cousin, I should have not the slightest regret in putting a hole through that silly smile of yours. It would not, of course, ruin my evening, but I rather think it would ruin yours!”

“Ah ...” George said, looking just a bit wary. He turned to his friend. “Whot ye want to bother with gentry morts fer? Lookee there, in the red gown ...” He was already pulling his friend off.

The third fellow without uttering a word chased after them, and Corry turned to her cousin and declared, “Babs, you are the most complete hand! Never say you brought your little pistol with you?”

“As a matter of fact,” Babs answered a bit sheepishly, “I meant to, but I forgot it.”

As Babs giggled, Corry raised her hazel eyes heavenward and severely requested, “Give me strength enough to keep my hands off her neck.” She looked back at her cousin. “You mean you ...”

“Bluffed them. ’Tis done all the time in poker,” Lady Babs supplied happily.

“But,” a masculine and familiar voice at Babs’ back said, “you executed it beautifully.”

The power of his voice sent her spinning around, and she almost landed in his arms. He wore a black domino and a mask, but even so she knew him, saw his glittering blue eyes in the glaring light of the many torches. For a moment the world receded and she was alone with him.

She was vaguely aware of Sir Frederick, who quietly comforted Corry as he led her to a bench a short distance away. It was as though she and Wildfire were sharing a breath. What was he doing? He was taking her gloved hand. She should speak, she had to speak, but nothing came to her mind or lips. Finally, she heard herself say, “Your grace.”

“And so, dark eyes, you do indeed know me. When you didn’t speak, I thought perhaps you were confused for the moment?”

“I would know you anywhere,” she answered as she got control of herself and flirted in her usual fashion. “There is that something in your mien that gives you away.”

He regarded her intently. “And what is that in my mien?”

“Your own unique sense of self,” she said and then giggled at his expression.

“Am I to take that as flattery or—”

“In your case, flattery, yes,” she said, cutting him off.

He pulled her arm through his and led her away as he said, “As it happens, I too, would know you anywhere.”

He had her down a maze of evergreens created for entertainment and moments like these, and he pulled her to him. Babs was alive with anticipation. He was going to kiss her. And she was right, quite right.

He took her into his arms and cursed softly, “Damn me for a cad, I should

tell you to run from me ... run far away and never look back ...” And so saying, his lips brushed gently, lightly against her own as he made a viable effort to stop himself and pull away.

She felt it the moment he got control and thought, *Oh no, I have waited for this too long ...*

The next thing she did was to fling her arms up and around him as best she could while she stood on her toes to make that kiss more than a touch.

She found his lips parting for hers; her tongue was met by his velvet tongue, and it entwined with hers in a way she had never experienced before. Heat rushed through her body as his hand went under her cloak and cupped her breast through the soft silk of her gown. *Faith!* She was behaving like a tart ... and it was with him, with this big handsome man ... absolutely thrillingly perfect!

He had just been about to pick up the strength to pull away from her. He was a demon to do this to an innocent young woman, but hell and fire, he wanted her, wanted her so damn much that his stomach clenched, his dick danced in his breeches, and he ...

What was she doing? She was reaching up, she was on her toes, she was pressing her delicious lips to his, and Nick, Duke of Barrington, lost control. His mouth worked her lips and gently parted them. His tongue dove with almost ferocious need, and she responded.

He was on fire. His body burned, his cock promised to go off in his breeches if he didn't pull away immediately, and, somehow, he managed to take her shoulders and set her apart.

“My dear beauty ... forgive me ...”

“*Not* if you are going to stop kissing me,” she answered dreamily. He wanted her, that was for certain. More than that, she thought. She was pretty certain he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman before. She knew this because she had grown to know something of him. He did not want to ruin her. He would not kiss her if he was in control, and her instincts told her he was not in control ... not at all ... and that gave her courage to pursue him.

“I must stop ... I do you an injustice, and I must get you away from here without anyone the wiser ...” He took her hand, and she allowed him to pull her along through the maze, but they only found themselves in its deepest, darkest area.

She giggled and went back into his arms. What she needed was to make him realize that he had met his match. Could she do that with some boldness she had never felt before? “Again, kiss me again.”

“*No ...*” Lord Wildfire said, trying to be resolute, but then he whispered,

“*Bloody hell*,” scooped her up, and did just that. He then set her apart by her shoulders. “I have been many things ... done many things I’m not proud of, but I won’t ruin a maid.”

“You aren’t ruining me—you are expanding who I am ...” she said enticingly.

“Where did you learn to talk like that?”

“From the Godwin papers,” she said with a soft smile.

“From what? Never say you were allowed to read such outrageous ...” He wagged a finger at her.

“Also, from you ...”

“From me? I never taught you to talk like that!”

“No, but you have taught me to feel like that.”

“Now that is—”

“The truth as I see it,” she interjected. “You draw out all that I am, and I like it ...”

“Well, stop it, stop liking it, for it simply won’t do.”

A tinkling ripple of laughter filled the air, and she saw that he was using a great deal of self-control; his hands were fisted at his sides, and he took a step back from her. “Turn around, minx. It is time we backtracked, before your father comes looking for you and decides to have my head, and rightly so.”

Her eyes lost their twinkle, and she said with a gasp as she remembered her father and Aunt Jane, “Oh ... oh yes ... let’s do.”

Just as they left the maze and came upon Sir Frederick and Corry, Babs felt a pair of eyes glaring at her. She turned and found her father staring directly at her.

“I better go face the music,” Babs said as she started off.

“Not without me, little one,” his grace said as he offered her his arm. She took it, and he led her to her parent, with Corry and Sir Frederick at their backs chattering away.

However, Lady Barbara’s father smiled to see the duke in attendance on his daughter. He waved her off, bade her enjoy herself, and returned his attention to his cronies. To his left, Lady Jane was chatting up her own circle of friends, and Babs breathed a sigh of relief.

The duke released a laugh and flicked her nose. “You are, most certainly, a minx. You slid through that one, didn’t you?”

“So I did ... Shall we return to the maze?” she teased.

“We shall not. I am feeling like a scoundrel. I am not in the habit of seducing young women, so I do beg your pardon for my conduct and—”

“And what, promise never to kiss me ever again?” She twinkled up at him.

He took her hand, pulled her out of the light and into the shade of some large yews, and crushed her into his arms. “You are driving me wild with your games. Do not play them with me ... you might be sorry.”

“Might I?”

“Do not mistake my dallying with you to be anything more than that ...”

She pulled out of his embrace. “Very well.”

He pulled her back against himself. She felt the hardness against her belly, and the feel of it so blatant ... so primal, beat at her own desires. She couldn't speak, though she wanted to tell him his words did not match his actions. Or did they? *Was he merely dallying?* It seemed so much more intense.

From nearby, however, they heard, “Babs ...”

Guiltily they jumped apart and moved into the light to find Corry still chatting with Sir Frederick and Otto scanning the masked people tripping about.

Otto grinned, and Babs looked at him and giggled. His mask and his domino were askew, and he was trying to adjust both as he called out merrily, “Ah, there you are ...”

Sir Frederick was still attempting to whisper in Corry's ear, things she seemed reluctant to hear, as they also approached, and Babs heard him say, “I can see you don't mean to be won over by any of my tricks.” Babs' eyes opened wide as she strained to hear Corry's reply.

Corry lifted her chin and looked up at his face. “Have you been trying to trick me, sir?”

He chuckled, and this time when he reached to touch her face, she did not flinch away. Babs moved closer, thoroughly intrigued.

“Certainly not! I have, however, been trying with the utmost care to seduce you.”

She laughed. “Really? I would not have guessed,” she said wryly.

He put a hand to his heart in mock show of pain. “Wounded. Ah, gentle maid, do you know what you have done to my pride?”

She laughed again, and Babs could see her cousin was genuinely amused. “You should be flattered, sir. I have been thinking what a gentleman you are.”

“And so I am,” he said on a quiet note. “But even a gentleman, when assaulted by such beauty, may be overcome to do the unthinkable.”

“What unthinkable would that be?” Corry urged him to go on.

His answer surprised Babs, and she studied Corry's face to find she too was taken aback, for Sir Frederick had moved to take Corry's chin with his gloved fingers, tilting her face upwards first to meet his intense gaze. He whispered, “If we were not now surrounded ... I would kiss those luscious lips ...”

“Ah,” said Corry demurely. “*Most unthinkable.*”

The two realized they were being closely observed, but luckily a diversion took away attention from them and onto Otto.

“Should have put a bullet in his head,” said Otto. “Stands to reason, the blackguard will try that sort of thing again.” Otto was oblivious to all but his recent experience. “Damned brute needed a lesson ... gave him one.”

“Bravo! But who needed a lesson, Otto?” Babs exclaimed with a clap of

her hands and a short laugh.

Sir Charles arrived and added, "Indeed, Otto ... I saw it, and you were most gallant." He turned to the assembled company and explained, "I noticed some poor peasant girl trying to sell some sweets when this brute decided he wanted to have a go with her ..." He nodded at Otto. "I was on my way to teach the fellow a lesson, when Otto popped in out of nowhere and landed the fool a facer."

"Well done!" said the duke, clapping Otto on the back.

"What happened to the girl?" Babs inquired worriedly.

"Charles here bought all the sweets she had and sent her home," Otto said with great pleasure.

"Oh, I do think you and Otto are heroes!" Babs exclaimed.

Jesting and laughter continued until Lady Haversham arrived and singled out Otto. Everyone knew that her ladyship had a *tendre* for Otto. They watched as she flirted outrageously with him; eventually, pulled along by her own set, she left him in peace.

"She wants you Otto ..." teased Babs.

"Blaaah ... uck ..." was the count's response.

"Translation being that Otto has formed a lasting passion for the Haversham ..." Charles said, bursting with mirth.

Otto proceeded to go off in a convulsion that created a havoc of indecent laughter amongst the little party, and so their night progressed most agreeably for all. Poor Otto, though, was teased without mercy until they all parted for the night.

It was hours later when Babs, unable to sleep, knocked on her cousin's door and then without permission stuck her head in. "Corry ... Corry ... are you awake?"

"I am now," Corry answered dryly.

Babs rushed in and plopped herself down on the bed. She pulled a throw quilt up to her chin and wrapped herself with it, as the fire in the room had already burned too low to give any comfort. "We didn't have a chance to talk earlier ..." Babs stated as an explanation.

"True," allowed Corry, who had now sat up and looked as though she too wished to discuss the events of the evening.

"I want to know all about Sir Frederick."

Corry shrugged in a manner that conveyed a certain reluctance but caved in and said on a sigh, "How can I tell you what I don't know?"

"Don't be provoking," Babs admonished. "Tell me what you do know, and we shall take it from there."

"What precisely do you want to know?" Corry sidestepped.

"What were you doing alone for so long ... what did he say to you ... what did you say to him?" Babs was as ever direct and went to the meat of

things.

“We were just walking ... conversation was just about silly things ...”

“Ah, so I see, you were walking and talking, how very enlightening. Fine.” Babs shrugged. “Would you like to know where I was, and whom I was with, and what I was doing?”

“I know what you were doing,” returned Corry with disapproval. “You were attempting to conquer Lord Wildfire’s heart.” She reached out and touched Babs’ hand. “You are getting in too deep, and it won’t serve.”

“He kissed me ... and what is more to the point, I kissed him back.”

“Babs, you are not some backstreet wench. He quite overstepped when he kissed you ...”

“Not his fault—I wanted him to, and he wanted to bolt, but I didn’t let him, *and I* kissed him. Corry, you know how I feel about such things. These are modern times, and I think all the rules were made by men for men, and I don’t agree with them.”

Corry eyed her cousin for a moment and relented by relaxing. “I know ... but I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Too late. If he doesn’t love me back ... I shall be hurt, but ... perhaps the fun of being with him ... will make up for it?” She eyed her cousin. “Do you like him ... Sir Frederick that is?”

“I don’t know ...”

“He likes you a great deal,” Babs said knowingly.

“Go to bed now, love ... truly ... time will give us the answers, for we don’t have them tonight.”

“Very well then, off I go, but I still don’t think I can sleep.” Babs sighed heavily. Her cousin was quite right. No answers leapt up at her, only one great hope.

~ Eleven ~

AS IT HAPPENED, the very next morning was the day they were scheduled to leave for Brighton.

Corry and Babs were given permission to ride behind the Waverly coach, and both were in high spirits. Some of their servants and most of their luggage would be conveyed by Lady Jane's carriage later that morning, and both Babs and her cousin were very excited about the excursion.

Babs noticed Sir Edward as they passed Bond Street; he had an odd expression on his face as he put up a hand to her before turning on his heel and vanishing down the avenue. However, she was too happy to be riding in the open air to give it any further thought.

"I do not like riding sidesaddle," complained Miss Bretton. "I was young enough back in the States to avoid censure when I rode astride."

"Yes, and we are well on our way out of town ... so as soon as we hit the wooded stretch along the Brighton Road, we can slip our legs over ..."

"Ha ... with no stirrup ... I don't think so."

"Hmmm, yes, not quite comfortable." Babs sighed. "As a rule I don't ride sidesaddle. But in town and on the main road ... well, I can't buck all of Papa's rules. One must after all, observe the proprieties," she said, trying to keep a straight face, but she lost control and went off into lively ripple of laughter.

They went on in this chatty style as town slipped away and woods began to line both sides of the road. Babs strained to see a coach up ahead, for on the curve she rather thought she saw the crest on the door. "Corry," she said on a tease, "I rather think you know the passenger in that coach up ahead ..."

"Nonsense ... how can you tell from here?" Corry said as she strained to see who Babs was speaking about.

All at once Babs laughed and said gleefully, as she pointed a ready finger (forgetting the proprieties once again), "There, I told you I saw him. 'Tis Sir Frederick ... I saw the crest, and now I have seen his face when he looked out his open window back at our coach—it is him!"

"No ... oh Babs ... I am so ... embarrassed ... if it is Sir Frederick, it has nothing to do with us ..."

"Yes, it does. I made a point of telling him that we were leaving for Brighton this morning ... and oh ... what a coincidence ... here is his coach on the Brighton Road?"

“Oh, oh dear ...” Corry’s voice tingled with a touch of excitement.

“My dearest pudding heart, one must make the effort, or one will find one’s self married to one that one does not love at all,” Babs teased unmercifully. “Now, do ride up with me ...” Babs turned to find her cousin slowing her horse, patting her tawny-highlighted auburn curls, and adjusting her pretty blue top hat. “Come on—do!” Babs laughed. “You look ravishing.”

Babs passed her father’s coach with a wave. He smiled indulgently at her through his window, and she knew he had no objection to her enjoying a ride as long as she stayed nearby.

As she approached the coach, she saw the crest and smiled. It certainly was Sir Frederick, and she turned to see that her cousin was riding sedately towards her. She shook her head and steadied her horse. It was at that moment that the coach made a horrible creaking sound.

Suddenly the rear wheel was off and spinning towards the woods flanking the road. In the next moment everything happened so fast, Babs was only able to stare in horror!

The coach first leaned towards the ditch between the road and the woods, then slammed backwards, and finally, with the horses screeching in fear, went over onto its side and nearly toppled all the way over into the ditch.

The horses were dragged when the coach slammed into the earth but managed to remain standing and unharmed, and the driver was able to save himself from a fall by hanging onto the rigging. Babs heard him screaming, but it wasn’t anything intelligible as he scrambled to right himself and make his way towards his only passenger.

Babs was off her horse and pulling him along as she ran to the overturned vehicle. She soothed and patted the coach horses at their heads as the driver scrambled over the coach’s side towards the only door available for his passenger’s escape.

“Steady, lads,” Babs said softly to the large dark bay pair. Fortunately, they had quiet temperaments and took the incident in stride.

“It won’t budge!” called the driver. “The door be jammed ...” He peered inside the carriage and called out, “Sir Frederick ... sir ... be ye hurt?”

No answer came from within.

“Do you need to break the glass of the door? Will that help?” Babs called.

“I’m not sure ...” the driver exclaimed, greatly agitated.

“Break it ... just go ahead ... maybe that will jar it loose ...”

“Oh ... oh ...” worried the driver, who began pulling and pounding on the door. All at once, the door flung open in his hand, nearly sending him flying backwards, and they saw Sir Frederick’s leg as it fell limply out.

Both could see Sir Frederick’s crumpled body lying on the floor of the coach.

By this time, Miss Bretton had arrived on the scene, and she took command. First she tethered both hers and Babs’ horses to a nearby tree, and then she gave the entire scene her scrutiny. “Do not move him.” She pointed.

“He has sustained a severe head injury ... see there?”

Babs could see the blood. There was so much blood pouring out of his head. “Corry, we need something to stop the bleeding!”

“Here comes your father’s coach now. Our driver can aid Sir Frederick’s driver, and hopefully between the two we can get Sir Frederick out without his sustaining any further injury.”

Lady Babs chewed her bottom lip. “Indeed, and then ... we will need a place to take him, and a doctor. There is an inn just a short distance from here. I shall ride there and have them send for a doctor and prepare a room for Sir Frederick.” She was already walking towards her horse.

“Wait ... Babs ... perhaps your father should be the one to ...”

But her cousin was already on her horse. “Tell Father to bring him to the Red Lion, and we shall all meet up there.” With that, she began trotting her horse down the road.

A great deal of road had been left behind when Babs reached the Red Lion in less than ten minutes. The inn was quaintly styled and brightly painted in red and white. It was landscaped with trimmed bushes and potted flowers. The total effect was most charming, and it was an inn Babs and her father often frequented in the past when on their way to Brighton.

A young groom came to take Babs’ horse as she dismounted, and she said sweetly as she dug into her pocket for a coin, “Do walk him a bit before you water him, and thank you.” She flipped him the coin and strode hurriedly towards the inn.

The innkeeper and his chubby wife knew her at once and came forward to greet her. She hurriedly explained the situation, requested a room be readied for Sir Frederick, and asked where she might find a doctor.

“Oi’d send young Tom out there for the doctor, but oi can’t spare him today, as that blasted Figley didn’t come in ...”

“That is fine. I will go for the doctor,” Babs assured him.

“Right then, if ye cut through the west woods, it be only a few minutes to his cottage. Ye can’t miss it ... ye take the west woods ... here across the road ... follow the bridle path, and ye’ll see a narrow paved road called Halie Lane to the left. Take it, and there is his cottage just down a bit from there ...”

“Thank you, Mr. Tibbs.” She smiled at both Mr. and Mrs. Tibbs and hurried back towards the stable, where she found her horse taking a long drink of water.

“Sorry, sweet boy,” she said softly, “we have another short trip to make, and then you can rest.” Up on his back and taking the innkeeper’s direction, she started out.

However, Babs found the bridle paths had not been groomed in some time. Fallen trees and overgrown brush hindered her progress as she was forced to weave her way through the thick of it, jumping logs and sideswiping

bushes, before she finally had the neatly paved lane in sight.

She glanced through the trees and could just make out a very fine cottage just down the road. She breathed a sigh of relief as she urged her horse forward.

Her horse clambered quickly out of the dark woods, as neither her horse nor Babs saw that a high-perched phaeton had just rounded the bend in the road.

Babs' horse spooked sharply to the left and nearly into the ditch, bending far forward and then hopping back up. Babs, not quite as secure in a sidesaddle, found herself holding on with all her strength to keep from landing in the ditch. With little dignity, she scrambled back into place in her saddle and saw herself reseated. She blew the stray hair from her eyes, pushed at the tangle that had come undone, and tried adjusting her top hat as she attempted to compose herself.

With her heart beating wildly, Babs watched the driver of the high-perched phaeton as he cursed softly before he pulled his spirited pair of grays to a halt. He handed the reins to his small tiger at the back of his vehicle with a clipped order to, "Hold them steady, lad." So saying, he jumped nimbly down from his driving seat and strode towards her.

"What you need, minx, is a spanking!" said the well-dressed, tall, and rakishly good-looking Duke of Barrington. "You could have been hurt! What the devil do you mean riding your horse out of the woods without care?" He seemed to get control of his temper and said more quietly, "You should know better."

Babs was dumbfounded to find her Wildfire on the spot, but his rudeness and his insult transformed her embarrassment into ire. Still, her cheeks burned. "I? *I should know better*? What about you, rounding a curve at that speed? And besides, what the deuce are you doing here?"

"What I am doing here is not the issue," he returned sharply. "What are you doing here ... charging around the woods unescorted when you should be on your way to Brighton with your family?"

"What I do need not concern you, your grace." Her chin was up with her temper. She knew she must look a sight. Her green riding jacket was torn at the sleeve, her hair was a mess, her matching top hat was askew, and when she brushed her hair away from her face her tan glove came away dirty ... was her face smudged as well? *Oh no*. What a way for him to see her!

He moved to her horse's flanks. He took her waist in his large hands, lifted her off her saddle, and set her on her booted feet. She did not object. It would have proven useless. Nor did she object when he smoothed away her black hair from her eyes and wiped the dirt from her face with his handkerchief. However, when he attempted to place her top hat correctly on her head, she swiped his hand away, as it made her feel even more childish. "Stop that," she admonished and realized she sounded even more childish than she felt.

His blue eyes caught her attention. They glittered with amusement. He said with something of a crooked grin, "Having told one another off in famous style, perhaps we may now discover what you are doing barreling through the woods alone."

Inwardly she was thinking that she could look into his eyes forever, listen to his deep masculine soothing voice—forever. Outwardly she straightened up and complained, "Why is that all that matters? You could have landed me in that ditch, and I could now be quite dead."

He laughed, right out loud, and flicked her nose. "Thankfully, you seem to be quite a little horsewoman and are very much alive."

She recalled her mission. "Oh, what am I doing wasting time. I have to find the doctor—"

"Doctor? What is amiss?"

"Sir Frederick—he was hurt when his carriage wheel went flying off and his coach toppled, and he was unconscious when I left him ..."

She started for her horse.

He took her by the hand, led her to the phaeton, unfolded and lowered the steps, and told her firmly, "Up with you ..."

"But I have to fetch the doctor ..."

"So we shall, immediately," he answered authoritatively. "We shall call on him right now."

"But ... what if he is not at home?" She suddenly realized he might not be.

"He is ... I passed him just awhile ago, and that is where he was headed," he answered as he took up the reins of her horse and tethered him behind the phaeton.

"Oh, Nick," she said breathlessly as she situated herself on the seat and sighed with great relief. "But ... *what are you doing here?*"

"Why, coming to the rescue, of course," he answered and sat beside her to grin widely.

~ Twelve ~

“OOOOH ...” Sir Frederick groaned impressively and put a hand to his aching head as he drifted back into reality.

“Lie still, sir, and try not to speak just yet,” Miss Bretton ordered in firm accents.

He opened his eyes, found her face, and appeared to focus. His hand reached for her, and he winced sharply but said, “So beautiful ... but ... where ...” He drifted off again.

Miss Bretton touched his shoulder, concerned, and he opened his light blue eyes and attempted a smile of sorts. “Hallo ...” he managed.

“Sir Frederick, do you remember what occurred ...?”

“You took off your mask ...” he said dreamily. “Lovely ...”

“There was a carriage accident ... your coach went over, and you were knocked unconscious.”

“Was I?”

Miss Bretton bit her bottom lip. He appeared dazed, and if she didn’t keep him talking he would drift off again. She was certain that was not what he should do. “That’s right ... you have now a large bump on your head, but we managed to get you to a very lovely inn ... and my aunt Jane washed the blood from your face. She is now downstairs arranging rooms for all of us, as you may not be fit to travel for a few days.”

“*You ... here ... with me.*” He grinned idiotically.

Ordinarily she would have giggled at his expression, but matters were too serious for that, and she was deeply concerned.

“Tell me, Sir Frederick, can you move your legs?”

“Don’t want to,” he said with the same grin.

“Please?” she cooed.

“Of course, my sweet ...” He made a valiant attempt and lifted first one leg under the covers and then the next, winced with pain, lay back, and sighed heavily.

“I do not think you have broken your legs, but your arm may have sustained an injury.” She sighed and added, “Lady Babs has gone in search of the doctor. They should be here any moment, and then we will know for certain. Your driver had a quick look at you and tells us you are badly bruised all over, so you must lie still.”

“My heart ...” he said dreamily.

“Oh no ... no ... have you a pain in your heart ...?” she cried with great distress.

“No, my heart ... filled with you ...” he said and nodded off.

“Dear ... oh dear ...” Miss Bretton said, but she couldn’t help the slight smile that curved her lips. She moved to adjust his covers, but his bare left arm looked twice its size. *Oh no*, she thought, *his arm is broken and will need to be set*.

Babs watched the duke at the reins with open admiration. Glancing her way, he caught her look. His sensuous lips formed a wide smile. “Y-es?”

She laughed. “I was only thinking how well you handle the reins. This is no easy conveyance to drive.”

“Thank you,” he said, and Babs noted that he sat taller in his seat.

“I am ever so glad you came along,” she said and then stopped herself. She wasn’t sure if she should voice her next question. However, ever impulsive, she dove right in. “I don’t quite understand though ...”

“What don’t you understand?”

“Last night, when I mentioned that I would be leaving London for Brighton this morning, you said that you would not be setting out for Brighton till next week.” She frowned. “And even if you changed your mind and were on your way there, you are off the beaten path a bit ... aren’t you?” She peeped at him after this last comment. “Are you lost?” She added this last to bait him further and get an answer.

“When *you* nearly landed yourself in a ditch by barreling in front of my phaeton, I was *not* on my way to Brighton and certainly *not lost*,” was his answer. He further frustrated her by grinning broadly.

She waited a moment while her brain went into action. Was he here to see a woman? Was that why he was in the area? A sudden depression swished through her system, and she turned away from him to contemplate the countryside.

He nudged her with his shoulder and said, “Curious minx. I was on my way to visit an old friend of my father’s. I had promised to give him a few days, and since he is just off the road to Brighton, I decided now was the time.”

She brightened at once and smiled up at him. “Oh, and then you will proceed to Brighton?”

“If that is where you will be ...” His smile lit his blue eyes, and his tone caressed her.

She was flooded with heat but managed to say on a breathless note, “You do that very well, and even so, I am prompted to disbelieve your sincerity.”

“Ah Babs, I would that you would trust me, for I have been honest with you from the start,” he said softly.

“Lord Wildfire, that is what you are called, and I am persuaded with good

reason. You would have me trust you—when you have advised me that you are merely dallying with me?” She eyed him doubtfully.

“Yes, and for that reason. You won’t get hurt if you understand up front just what the rules of the game are.” His eyes glinted with amusement.

“I am not really very good with rules ...” she said. “And besides, I have been warned about you.”

“What have they told you? You called me Wildfire, but you do know that it was only a name my fellow officers and men gave me during our fighting in the Peninsula ... and it stuck.”

“Otto told me you have a reputation for going through women like wildfire, and that is *why it stuck*.” She twinkled up at him.

“Perhaps that was so, but he had no business telling you that!” his grace returned with a frown. “What was he doing—warning you off me for himself?”

“Nonsense. Otto and I are friends ... and we both know that.”

“I have no desire at this moment to be ... only a friend to you, little one. So perhaps Otto is right to warn you away from me.”

“You talk about rules and such, but you have said you don’t play with innocent maids, and yet, I am no fool ... I see that you want me ... and I think at times you mean to have me.” Boldly Babs put up her hand. “I know nothing permanent is on your mind ... and yet, you have kissed me, and I have not stopped you. Indeed, I rather understand you aren’t looking for ... er ... friendship.”

He eyed her for a long moment after this speech. She could see the hungry look in his blue eyes and admitted to herself that she was walking dangerous territory. What would he think of her?

He said in a very low tone, “You seem to understand the rules I speak of, and as I pointed out, if we adhere to those rules, your heart won’t be in it and we may enjoy our time together ...”

A gasp formed in her throat, but she stifled it. He was propositioning her openly for a clandestine affair. She wanted to appear worldly and sophisticated because she wanted to win him, take his heart from him, and hold it in her hands to remind him of this moment when he broke all his own rules and seduced an innocent maid, for with all her forwardness, she was still that.

“Breaking rules ... can get both the gentleman and the lady rule breakers seriously ... um ... how shall I say this, oh yes ... entwined in a world they did not expect. *I am aware* of what *I want* and how I mean to have it—*are you?*”

He eyed her with shock glittering in his blue eyes. She saw it and smiled to herself. She was certain he had not expected her to be anything but reticent and demure when he pushed her over the line of flirtation. She could see he had meant only to scare her off, but now, *now* he had his hands full. What would he do with his proposition now?

“We are nearly there,” he said, abruptly changing the subject.

Ah-ha, she thought, he was backing down—just as she thought he would. She had Lord Wildfire just where she wanted him ... *ready*, so ready for her to seduce beyond his own rules and regulations!

She answered him saucily, giving him the double meaning he had not expected. “Oh yes, we are ... we most certainly are ...”

~ Thirteen ~

MISS BRETTON'S FEARS had been confirmed when the doctor arrived with Babs leading the way and his grace bringing up the rear.

They watched and cringed as the doctor put a piece of wood into Sir Frederick's mouth and said to the assembled company around him, "It is a good thing he is unconscious just now ... for this will hurt."

A moment later they all heard the awful sound as the doctor snapped the bone into place. Sir Frederick awoke, bit down on the wood, spit it out, groaned, and collapsed once more. The doctor affixed a splint in place, wrapped it with cloth covering Sir Frederick's arm from his wrist to his elbow, and then rested it in the sling he fixed around his neck.

He turned and announced to his onlookers, "He needs to stay awake for a few hours ... and then he needs to stay in bed for three days. He has severe bruising all over his body, and what he will need is rest."

Lady Jane took the doctor's arm and led him away to the main galley, offering to give him lunch. He accepted, and they vanished below stairs.

Lord Waverly looked at Babs and apologized. "We shall have to stay with the poor fellow ... as I don't feel right just jaunting off and leaving him to the innkeeper ..."

"Oh Papa, you are such a dear and quite right. We could never just leave him here ..." Babs said, putting her arms around her father and getting on her toes to kiss his cheek.

Miss Bretton breathed a sigh of relief, for she did not know how she could leave Sir Frederick as helpless as he presently was. She placed a damp, cool cloth to his head, trying to wake him, and Babs turned to his grace and clasped his hands thankfully. "You did come to the rescue—you knew exactly where the doctor was and fetched him for us. Thank you, your grace."

"Nick ... was I not Nick during our little crisis earlier?" he asked softly.

"Yes, of course, Nick it is ..."

He stepped forward, put his hat on a nearby chair, took the damp cloth from Corry, and said, "Why don't you and your cousin go downstairs for a bite to eat, and I will wake Freddy boy ..."

"Oh ... I could not impose ..." Corry said doubtfully.

"You both have had a long morning and need to go sit and relax for a bit, have some luncheon, and then I am certain Lady Babs would like to ... er ... change her clothing."

Babs laughed, gave him a naughty tilt of her shoulder, and said, "Thank you, Nick ... so we shall, but what about you?"

"I had a hearty breakfast before I left home and shan't eat until tea ... now go on, I'll take good care of Freddy."

Babs sat back after devouring everything on her plate and noted that Corry was only playing with her food. "Corry ... do eat. Sir Frederick will be just fine ... we shall all take turns sitting with him ..."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said, playing with the pretty pearl ring on her finger. "However, I can't help but feel ... that had he not rushed to join us on this excursion ..."

"You must not think like that. That wheel didn't go flying off until the trip was nearly half done. There was no way even the best of coachmen could have noticed anything amiss," Babs said with conviction. "It was due to come off."

Corry's face brightened. "Yes, yes. That does make sense ..." She nibbled at her chicken and said, "Do you know, I do think I have misjudged your duke."

"We shall see. It is probably too soon to tell," returned Babs with a twinkle.

"Babs ... Babs ... there is something in the way you said that ..."

His grace entered the dining galley at that moment. He strode over to the ladies, and Miss Bretton waved a hand to a chair. "Your grace ... do join us ..." Though her tone was polite and pleasant, it was impossible not to see the worried look in her eyes.

He allayed her fears at once. "Lady Jane relieved me and is now keeping poor Freddy very much awake. Finish your meal, and then you two can relieve her. As to sitting with you now, I can think of nothing I would rather do, but I am afraid the squire is expecting me." He bowed himself off, but the sound of Babs chair scraping against wood brought a smile to his face.

She got to her feet and went to him, hand extended. "Thank you, your grace ..." She saw the look in his eye and laughed. "Nick."

He put her hand through his bent arm and said softly, "Come then, and do me the honor of walking me to my phaeton."

She smiled up at him and thought, *Oh faith, his devilishly twinkling blue eyes simply take all my plans and all my logic and throw them to the wind.*

"Will ... will we see you during Frederick's recovery?" she asked on a whisper.

"You know, little beauty, you should probably stay away from me."

"Yes, I know," she answered. "But I don't know that I want to ... do you honestly wish me to?" Had those words come out of her mouth?

He took a long look at her and then with a groan pulled her to the side of the inn and had her planted against the wall. They were well out of sight, as

bushes flanked them from view. “No, sweetheart, no. I want you in my way, but I make you no promises beyond this.”

He bent and brushed his lips against hers, and then as she threw herself into the kiss, he pressed her against his body, swept a hand over her full breast, and pushed his bulging cock against her. Babs felt herself transported into a world of hungry desire. Was this her?

His kiss traveled into another, but then all at once he pulled away. His gaze was filled with the primal heat he felt, and he bent once more and kissed her neck, murmuring softly, “Hell and fire, I want you, sweetheart ...” His kisses traveled to the fullness of her breasts just above her squared, low bodice.

She trembled at his touch and whispered, “I want you too ...”

Suddenly, he stepped away from her and held her shoulders. “Forgive me ... I am a devil to do this to you ...”

“But—”

He took her hand and pulled her along with him. “No,” he said firmly. “This is not fair ... you are too young, too innocent ... untried. I will not do this to you!” He set her at the inn’s door. “Go inside, Lady Babs ... get away from me.” He turned on his heel and stomped off.

She was not hurt. She was not surprised. She found herself admiring him even more. He was a man of honor ...

He wasn’t the devil. *She was.*

He more than wanted her, and she knew it inside her being with all that she was. He loved her, and she meant to prove it to him—one way or another. Lady Babs smiled to herself and turned back to the inn.

Lord Wildfire had met his match.

The Duke of Barrington was at war with himself. He could not remember ever feeling this way about a woman. He liked women—very much—and it was more than a sexual thing. They were a mysterious lot, each different from the other, but this one female, this rough-and-tumble woman-child drew something out of him that set his world upside down.

Marriage—he knew it was something he would eventually get to, but marriage was coming to mind every single time he took her into his arms. He heard the word *mine*.

The thought that she might give her hand to another drove him past reasonable logic. He seemed to have more than a physical desire for her. She had entered and tickled his mind with her quixotic behavior, her rebellious outlook, her laughter, her glittering dark eyes, and her sweet nature. Everything about her called to him to give it up, but he didn’t want to end, like so many, in a loveless marriage ... seeking affection elsewhere. When he married, he wanted with all his heart to be a faithful, attentive, good husband—and father.

He wanted his woman—his wife—to be passionate in bed. He wanted to satisfy her and be satisfied. He didn't want to turn to another. Would an inexperienced maid be enough for him? Something shouted, *Fool! Babs would!*

How could he be certain?

He had to be certain, and this couldn't be a fancy that might fade. He could not be led by his dick. And he wasn't sure whether or not it was real.

It simply had to be more than the raging hard-on driving him to her. Was it more? Damn, he rather thought it was, but how could he be sure?

Was he a cad to lead her on to give herself to him?

Or was he a man falling deeply in love?

Where was the answer?

Adam and Eve was the name of a tavern in Soho, and its galley was oversized and contained skittle alleys and cozy arbors designed in the seventeenth century. Remnants of a small pond that had for a time housed goldfish caught Sir Edward's eye as he passed. With a little care and grooming, he thought, it could be brought back to its former glory. However, he didn't really care. He was here at this tavern, which was presently known for entertaining persons of questionable character, for a specific reason.

He looked about and with a knowing eye identified the prostitutes, pickpockets, and footpads going about their business of the evening.

Many of these individuals looked his way with curious interest; he was sure they wondered what a well-dressed gentleman was doing in their establishment. He had chosen to sit at a round table shoved in a corner, with his back to the wall as he watched and waited.

A man dressed in the ordinary costume of an office clerk walked into the tavern, headed directly for Sir Edward's table, nervously looked around, and hurriedly took up a chair with only a perfunctory nod of greeting.

Sir Edward leaned back against the hardness of his wooden chair and drew on his cigar as he stared at the youthful clerk seated across the table from him. He had to think this out. What would this young man tell him, he wondered, and would it further his cause?

"Oi looked into it for ye, Sir Ed—"

"Shut up, you fool—do not use my name!" snapped Sir Edward.

"Aye then, oi looked into it, and of a certain, 'er name was Waverly. Oi remember thinking whot a foin loidy she be when she came in ... didn't know 'er name then, though. And oi'm 'oping ye don't mean 'er 'arm ... as she was kind enough to bring me a pastry from 'ome ..."

"Devil is in it that that I don't mean her harm. I should, for all that she has put me through, but rest easy on that score. I don't mean her any real harm," Sir Edward answered, believing this was actually true. What he meant was to marry her and make her happy. He believed she was too young to know her

own mind, but he meant to make it up for her.

“Aye then, oi’ll be taking the rest of that purse ye promised.”

“And so you would even if I meant her harm.” Sir Edward sneered at him.

The youth’s cheeks spotted with red, and he shot back, “As to that, oi ain’t plump enough in the pocket to go throwing away the gold ye offered, and loikes oi told ye, oi can’t be certain t’was her hand that penned the book ye speak of. She brought it in, but Lord Byron was with ’er when she did ... and it could be ’is work ... though why ’ee wouldn’t claim it ... is more than oi can say.”

Sir Edward pushed the purse towards him and got up from the table. He was in a foul mood. She had pushed him to this, and part of his mind railed against what he was doing. It would be blackmail. There was no other term for it, and he had never thought he would have to resort to this to obtain the hand of the woman he desired. It was humiliating, and a part of him hated her for that.

Sir Edward inclined his head disdainfully as he left the clerk and made his way out of the disreputable tavern. Once outside he sucked in air and frowned again. He would have Lady Babs in his power ...

And still, his pride was pinched.

He was the pink of the pinkest! He was sought after by all mamas with daughters wishful of making a superb match. And what happened? The one woman he wanted did not want him! Well, she would learn to ...

Hopefully, he would conquer her heart, but sadly, she would be angry with him for using this piece of information to force her hand.

She would get over it.

She did not have a choice.

By now his love would be in Brighton. He would travel there in the morning, and he would seek her out and give her his ultimatum ... call her bluff.

He would have to make her see that he would ruin not only her with this information, but her father, her aunt, her cousin ... all because of her. She would have no choice in the matter! And then he would take the contrary Lady Babs as his bride!

~ *Fourteen* ~

“BABS ...” MISS BRETTON answered her cousin with sugar sweetness coating her tone.

Babs eyed her warily. “Y ... es?”

“Adone-do!” snapped Miss Bretton sharply. “I simply won’t discuss this with you any further.” She started for the bedroom door and actually made it to the latch before Babs dove at her and stopped her with her hands on her hips.

“Adone-do?” Babs repeated in dumbfounded resonance. “Adone-do? What? Are we slipping into Shakespeare and medieval scenes? What can you mean, adone-do?”

“Enough—enough is what I mean. You have asked me at breakfast, and hounded me ever since, if I am forming a *tendre* for Sir Frederick. I have answered you. Now that is all there is. I ... well yes, I do like him—but it is nothing more.”

“Then why do you hover over him, watching to make certain he eats his meals and drinks that vile tisane you prepared for him ... *yourself*?”

Corry put up her chin and eyed her cousin with her delicate brows arched. “That vile tisane brought down that awful fever.”

“Yes, but—”

“But that is precisely why I made certain he drink it. The sooner he recovers, the sooner we may all leave here,” Miss Bretton pronounced in frigid terms. “Now, stop badgering me.”

“Corry?” Babs sighed and gave it up. “Very well then, I shan’t expect you to confide in me ... but life is full of two-way avenues, isn’t it?”

Miss Bretton eyed her inquiringly. “What now? What are you keeping from me?”

“Aha ... two way avenues,” Babs said, moving away from the door. “Go on, go do whatever it is you are itching to do.”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

“I think not,” Babs said thoughtfully. “I think I’ll go take a ride on Chester ... and explore the countryside for an hour or so ...” She eyed her cousin, and her voice was full with a tease. “Go on, Corry ... Sir Frederick may need you ...”

Corry puffed up with a swish of her form-fitting green day gown and left her cousin to her own devices, which was just what Babs wanted. Her father

was belowstairs playing chess with another guest. Aunt Jane was busy also with some embroidery work in the reading room, where she declared the light was perfect, and so Babs was free to head towards the stables.

She had the groom help her with her saddle, mounted lightly up, set herself in place, and moaned silently that she had to ride sidesaddle. She then headed towards the field she had discovered flanked Squire Egerly's home.

After all, she excused herself with a fib, she was simply taking a ride near the inn ... nothing more. The duke was probably busy with the squire, and she wouldn't bump into him at all.

What a depressing thought.

The squire had entertained Nick in his bedroom, where they enjoyed breakfast together. His health was certainly waning, and Nick was sorry for it, thinking that he was losing yet another connection to his beloved father's memory.

Leaving the older man to rest, he wandered about the house, attempted to read the *Chronicle*, and gave it up with a heavy sigh. She was in his head, under his skin, making his blood tingle with need.

What was he going to do? He had to stop obsessing about the taste of her tongue, the fullness of her breast ... the sparkle in her dark eyes! Stop! In his head, he heard someone shout out for her ... *Go to her, take off her clothes, take out your dick, man, and—*

What was wrong with him?

He didn't seduce innocent maids—he just didn't. He had no honest intentions towards her, and yet, damn, he didn't know how he was going to get through the season with her bouncing about in front of his face.

He strode hard towards the stables, not bothering to put on his hat or even his riding gloves. It only took a moment to saddle one of the squire's horses, and off he went into the field. His trot turned into a canter, and his canter suddenly was a gallop as he headed for a line fence and took it into another field ...

The inn was in sight.

And so was the woman he lusted after ... riding towards him, her long black hair all about her beautiful face as she cantered to a stop and laughed. She looked like a wild and sensual woman, and he felt his cock make a demand ... and damn, he wanted to give in to that demand.

"Hallo. Were you headed for the inn ... to see Sir Frederick?" she asked him sweetly.

"No, I thought I would look in on him a bit later in the afternoon," he said softly. He found he could not stop staring, first at her lips, down the length of her lovely neck, further to the white piece of lace protruding from her buttoned navy wool riding jacket. He wondered what she would look like naked on her horse.

"Oh ... then, just out for a ride ...?"

“You could say that,” he hedged and allowed his horse to fall into step beside hers.

“He is doing better, though ... Corry gave him a horrid tisane, but it did bring down his fever.”

Nick frowned. “He had a fever?”

“Oh yes. It started shortly after you left ... and he tossed and turned and ... he called out for Corry over and over.”

“Ah, my friend, no doubt is smitten.” Nick smiled and thought he had never seen such luscious full lips. He wanted to feel them beneath his own. He wanted to part them and dart his tongue in to taste her once more.

“Charming countryside.” Babs attempted to make idle conversation because her throat felt as though something was stuck in it. She had to clear it in fact, before she pointed and observed, “Oh look ... that broken-down barn, it must have been so pretty once ...”

“Aye, no doubt it was a stud barn at one time. The squire used to enjoy breeding his prime bloods, and this is where he must have put the stud paddock—keeping them separate from the mares, till it was time for ... er breeding.”

“Oh, then I am trespassing on the squire’s land ...” she peeped at him, and he had the feeling she knew very well that she was.

He suddenly stopped his horse and said, “Let’s walk a bit ...”

“Lovely,” she said.

He hopped off his horse and managed to get to her, reach for her, and hold her trim waist as he helped her dismount.

He hadn’t meant to press her so close—or had he? He had meant only to lend a gentlemanly hand, but he didn’t seem to be in control any longer. He held her against himself still; he held on so tightly that he felt her full breasts through her clothing and imagined them bared before him. His cock throbbed in his breeches, and he wanted to rip off her clothing and ...

When she looked up at him, he saw desire in her dark gaze and knew he was most definitely lost in the moment.

He couldn’t stop.

You can’t stop—or won’t? he asked himself.

The next thing he knew he was crushing her in his strong embrace. He bent and brushed his lips against her full, delicious mouth, parting her lips so he could search out and find, oh ... damn, there it was, smooth and tasty ... so very tasty ...

He slowly moved his tongue in the depth of her mouth, teaching her with slow precision what he wanted, what they both needed, and she responded wildly and with abandon.

He wasn’t the sort to be guided by desire. He had always been in control, but he found he could not resist her kiss, her body; he couldn’t resist all that she was.

She seemed more in control than he, more intent on what she was doing

as she managed to scramble out of her riding spencer and, with it dangling from her hand, to throw herself once more into his arms. He found himself unbuttoning her lacey blouse and opening it wide. His mouth started to water.

She wore no undergarments, and he felt a pleasurable surprise ...

It reverberated in his brain: *she wore no undergarments*. Had she hoped for this moment? The notion spurred his primal need, and his libido took over, completely banishing all logic, all thought as he bent and suckled at her breast, fondling the other. He heard the rumble in his throat and felt almost violent as he took what she offered.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I never knew how—oh ..."

Her words thrilled him. She wanted him, even as he wanted her, and then out of nowhere ...

A clap of thunder!

When had the sky gone black? Where had those clouds come from?

He took her hand and the horses' reins and rushed towards the shabby barn they had passed only a moment ago.

Sir Frederick sat up and stared at Miss Bretton as she adjusted his sling to make him more comfortable. "There," she said with a soft smile. "Shall I bring you a light lunch?"

"Not if you have to leave me," he said quietly.

She felt her cheeks grow hot. "Well, as to that, only for a little while ..."

"Not even for a moment," returned the gallant.

She peeped a smile at him, and he patted the bed with his free hand. "Come, sit near me ..."

"That would be most improper," she said as she dragged a ladies' chair near the bed. "This will do without raising eyebrows, for you must know my aunt will look in on you any moment now."

"Will she? How kind," Frederick said, sincerely touched. "But you won't leave ... please do not leave."

She laughed. "I shall use the time she spends with you to fetch you a bite to eat, sir. You must keep up your strength."

"There is nothing wrong with m'legs, you know. I can walk just fine, and did so in the early hours."

"Yes, well, that is all well and good, but has nothing to do with—"

"I can fetch m'own food, my love ... is what I am trying to say. I don't want you waiting on me like this ... not the courtship I had in mind."

"Sir Frederick!" Corry murmured. He was so open, so forthright, so bold, and the quiet Miss Bretton was very much impressed.

"Have I spoken out of turn?" He frowned. "I thought you could not doubt my intentions."

"I ... I ... but you have sustained a head injury and—"

He barked a laugh. "And you think I don't know what I am saying?" He

shook his head. "I know, but what I don't know is does my plan ... offend you? I've made a botch of it. It was my dream to go down on one knee in a garden of spring flowers and ask you if you would do me the honor of becoming my bride."

"Oh—oh ..." whispered Miss Bretton.

"Has my clumsiness offended you?"

"Offend me? I am so completely honored and overwhelmed ..."

He grinned like a boy, and Miss Bretton admitted to herself that Babs was quite correct. She was hopelessly in love with Sir Frederick.

"You might not think so when I tell you more about myself," he said, suddenly looking grim.

"All I need to know—I see ... I feel," she said breathlessly.

"I am humbled," he answered.

"Humbled—why should you be humbled? Ah, grateful no doubt that we stayed behind to look after you. It is what decent people do," Lady Jane said as she opened the door wide. She gave Corry a disapproving glance for not already having the door open more than a crack.

Miss Bretton remained placid in the face of her aunt's glance, saying only, "Ah, Auntie, now that you are here ... I shall go below and fetch Sir Frederick some lunch."

"Yes, you do that ..." Her aunt busied herself with shaking the drapes about and opening the window. "Hmmm. You need some air ..."

Corry swallowed a smile as she looked at Sir Frederick's horrified face and hurried off.

The duke tethered the horses to a nearby post and watched as they calmly grazed on the grass at their hooves. He turned to Babs and said softly, "It doesn't look as though it will last ..."

She moved in closer to him and allowed the spencer she had been holding around herself to drop to the old straw on the barn floor. "What doesn't look like it will last?"

"You are a tempting minx and have no idea what you are getting yourself into, playing with me like that," he answered gruffly as his glance ravaged her breasts and his finger reached and fingered her pert nipple.

"Oh, but I do ..." she said as her hand traveled over his hard chest.

"Sweet beauty," he whispered. "You should run."

"I don't want to ..." she answered.

With that—with the look in her eyes, the sway of her body, the delicious scent that infiltrated his senses—he took her into his arms once again. His kiss this time was driven with feral resolve. 'Feelings and desires' won out, and he was helping her out of her riding skirt ... laying her down in the old straw around them ... throwing off his own clothes, whispering words he couldn't believe while moaning with hunger. "Babs ... my sweet innocent ... I want

you beyond all other considerations ...” He was out of his coat and waistcoat, his shirt flung aside, his boots finally off, and on his knees over her with his huge shaft at full attention.

“As I do you ...” She glanced at his dancing cock with wide eyes and lay back with her full breasts pointed at him, her nipples hard, her body yearning.

He stared at her and then groaned as he bent over her and suckled at her pink buds until she arched with pleasure.

He moved over her, and his hard rod brushed up against her naked belly. She whispered with desire, a desire that drove him into a feral response, “Ah ... I think you are as large as a stallion ...”

He laughed and was filled with joy as she reached for his cock and touched it. His body trembled with heat and pleasure as she stroked it, and he said, “Hold it ... yes, like that ...” He put his hand over hers and taught her the motion he wanted.

“Beauty ... sweet beauty ...” He moaned as he pulled it away from her and bent to fondle her breasts and kiss her again. When his mouth moved off hers he whispered, “Delicious ... you are the most delicious thing I have ever tasted ... I want you ... now ...” He put his finger into the cleft between her thighs; she was dripping wet, and the knowledge thrilled him. He moved his finger to her nub and worked her until she was arching her back and bumping instinctively against his finger for more, and so he gave her more with yet another finger playing against her wet walls, finding the spot that made her squeal with delight.

As he worked her, she groaned with pleasure and pumped against his hand. He brought her to a shuddering climax and felt a satisfaction he had never experienced before. He was filled with joy—so much so, he nearly went off with her.

He controlled himself as he positioned the hard, throbbing head of his dick to her pink-lipped opening and rubbed it to the sound of her groans of delight. He found he wanted to please her and go on pleasing her; he wanted her, and wanted, and he fought back the word that came to his head over and over: *mine—mine—mine*.

It was a primal emotion he had not experienced with any other woman. She drew from him words he wanted to banish.

Instead, he was going to make this about lust, keep it about lust. He was going to ram himself into her, take her innocence quickly so the pain would be over in but a moment and then replaced with ecstasy. He had never before allowed himself to take a virgin, but this one was always meant to be his.

Why was he doing this? Why? Love? Was this love? It certainly was more than any other emotion he had ever experienced with any other woman ...

The answer was there in his heart, because he knew, absolutely knew that Babs Waverly, minx of all minx, was the one—the only that he would ever ... ever what? Yes, it had to be love. He didn’t want it to be—was it?

And then he was inside her. He felt her flinch and almost withdrew, but his little tigress clung to him and bucked into him and allowed her instincts to guide her even as he held her rump up and moved her with him.

She exploded again, and he allowed himself release, but when they were done shuddering in each other's arms, he knew, he would never let her go ... He would tell her ... he had to tell her, and the enormity of what he felt left the words stuck on his tongue.

She looked up at him and said, "Oh, Nick ... I ... I should not tell you this ..."

He stopped her. He didn't want her to tell him first. He wanted to tell her, and he wanted to do it in his own way. "Wait ..." he said on a husky sound. "Not now ..."

He saw her lashes flutter, and something about the way she moved, the way she stiffened made him realize she'd misunderstood. She jumped to her feet like a hellcat and began dressing herself.

"La ... but look ... the sun is returning ... I had better hurry before I am missed," she turned to him and said, her chin up. "Thank you ... so that is what it is all about." And the next thing he knew she was out of the barn and mounting her horse.

What the hell? Just what the hell happened? He answered himself with a sigh, *You happened.* Well, he would make it right. He had to.

Babs came away from their encounter totally devastated. She had thought she could be a modern woman, with modern ideals. She thought that she could show him that he loved her. Ha! She had been wrong, so wrong.

He not only didn't love her, he didn't want to hear it from her either, Babs thought as a sob caught in her throat. *She was a fool.* She had thought if they made love, he would have to admit his feelings to himself and then to her, but she was wrong. He didn't love her at all. He had warned her off early in their introduction to one another, and *this was not his fault.*

This was her fault. She thought—she had been so sure—that he loved her and that he would declare it to her once they had consummated their feelings for each other.

Wrong!

She was the worst kind of fool, because she had lied—tricked herself into believing only what she wanted to believe and not what he had been telling her, that he was only in it for 'fun'.

She had to get away from him and couldn't allow him to see how hurt she was. She would have to behave as though nothing had happened and nothing ever would again ... and oh, that hurt as much as knowing he was not really in love with her.

Making love with him had been the culmination of her dream. It was everything she had hoped it could be. He had brought her to the edge and

given her sweet release, and she would never be able to do that with any other man. She knew that she was made for only him—for her beloved Lord Wildfire.

The inn was in sight, and the sky opened up once more. The downpour of the rain soaking her, covering her from head to booted toe, helped her. She wouldn't have to face a soul as she ran to her room to get out of her wet clothes and change. She could have a good cry—all by herself, for she would never tell anyone about this day. She would keep it as a sweet memory ... only a memory.

And when they should chance to meet ... tears flowed freely down her cheek ... she would behave as though nothing had ever passed between them. She would laugh and jest and give him no more than a passing remark as she moved out of his reach!

~ Fifteen ~

SIR EDWARD HAD hired bachelor lodgings for the Brighton season. They were centrally located, decorated in the first stare of elegance and furnished with more style and flair than comfort.

This singular thought came to mind as he attempted to find some measure of ease in a wing chair situated by the bow window, which overlooked the quiet street below.

He sighed and came to grips with himself. This was utterly frustrating—everything about Lady Babs was frustrating—but eventually the Waverlys would arrive. After all, where could they be?

They had leased a house, and that house (he had checked) was in readiness for their arrival. The staff hadn't a clue, however, when that might be, as they had already been expected to do so.

He stood and paced over his Oriental rug. He knew he was obsessed, and he knew that wasn't healthy. Yet—he couldn't do anything to stop his obsession. He wanted her to the point of distraction.

He could not, would not be beaten in this.

She needed a set down—and by all that was holy, he was just the man to give it to her!

He moved towards his window and saw that his man had arrived and was already skipping up the steps of his lodgings. Good.

He stood, his hands clasped at his back as he waited for the study door to open and his man to enter.

"Sir?" His gentleman's gentleman, Jeffry, was breathless as he timidly stuck his head into the salon.

"Come in, come in, don't dawdle!" Sir Edward snapped.

"Yes, sir," Jeffry answered.

"Well—what have you discovered?" Sir Edward inquired impatiently.

"Backtracked, sir ... and discovered from an acquaintance of mine that the entire Waverly family have stopped at the Red Lion and are looking after a sick friend."

"A sick friend? Who could that be?"

"My friend didn't know more than that, sir."

Sir Edward went thoughtful but dug into his pocket, found a coin, and placed it in his servant's hand. "Good man, Jeffry... at least I know what is towards, good man."

Jeffrey bowed himself out, and Sir Edward pulled at his lower lip. A sick friend, eh? Well, that was excusable and not some whim of Lady Barbara's that took them astray. Fine. Perhaps he would just enjoy himself, as Brighton was already full with the fashionables of his set, and await her arrival. Perhaps?

It would be difficult, though, for he dearly wanted to show her once and for all that there was no fighting it. *She was meant for him.*

Sir Frederick watched his friend pace and grinned. "Shall I tell you what is wrong with you, 'ol' man'?"

"Go to hell," replied the duke with the greatest affection.

"I might yet do that, but then again, who knows, me thinks I might yet be saved by an angel." Sir Frederick sighed sweetly, and then added, "As you might yet be."

"Me? Looks like now I am on a direct path ..." The duke sighed, sitting. "I have to find a way to talk to her ... and she won't, you know ... talk to me, that is."

"Why not?"

"Damn if I know." The duke shook his head. "Women are the strangest creatures alive. One minute smiles and giggles and the next ice and hard stares." He sighed heavily. "No doubt it is no more than I deserve, cad that I am ..."

"Cad? You? Never. You are the best of the best," scoffed Sir Frederick, staring at his friend. "What is all this?"

"Naught, pay me no mind."

"Aye, and so I would not ... but, Nick ... your soul ... it is right where it has always been, in that great big heart of yours."

"Afraid the devil has a hold of it now ..." The duke had been giving himself a beating since the afternoon before, when he'd taken his beloved's innocence from her. He should have told her at once that he adored her, but he had it in mind to tell her father first and ask for the right to her hand. Now look where such niceties had gotten him. She thought him a rake of the worst sort ... and he was. He was experienced and should not have given in to his lust. He had come by really to catch a glimpse of her last evening, and she had been holed up in her room. And today, she had cold-shouldered him on her way out to ride just as he arrived.

Perhaps the best thing he could do was give it time?

Sir Frederick sighed and said dreamily, "She—I think she loves me ... I can't be certain, but I have great hopes."

The duke rounded on his injured friend, danger in his blue eyes. "I did not know you had a *tendre* for Lady Babs!"

"Lady Babs? *What?* No, you fool ... Miss Bretton. My heart belongs to Miss Bretton."

The duke grinned broadly. "Then I wish you all the luck in the world."

"Aye, I declared myself, you see."

"Without first applying for her hand ... to Lord Waverly or Lady Jane?"

The duke was surprised.

"I'll do that, but I first wanted to know ... wanted her to know how I felt ..."

The duke became thoughtful. "You know, Freddy ... you are a far more clever man than I."

Sir Frederick ignored this, as his mind seemed locked on a problem, and he said, "The trouble is ... I don't want her to hear rumors about me and not understand the facts ... but I am so afraid that after I tell her, she won't want me any longer."

"Don't be a dunce." The duke snorted. "Miss Bretton has a very sound head on her shoulders."

It was at this point that the lady in question appeared and poked her head in the doorway to say, "Good afternoon, your grace ... How is our patient doing this afternoon?"

A moment later, the duke was taking his leave of his friend and smiling to himself at the glances Freddy and Miss Bretton shot one another. He shook his head and sighed.

He took the last step and thought to go into the galley for a pint when he bumped into the Lady Babs. He was aware that she caught a small, distressed sound in her throat as he touched her shoulders, only to steady her. He immediately dropped his hands.

"Babs ... I would like to speak with you ..."

"I am afraid I cannot. I am promised to Lady Jane ... I have to hold her silks for her while she puts the final touches to her embroidery," Babs said, rushing off.

He reached out and held her upper arm. "Babs ... sweet ... don't go ..."

"I am sorry," she said as she pulled away from his hand and hurried out of sight.

He looked after her, uncertain what next his course of action should be.

If he loved her, Babs thought, if he wanted her not to hurt, he would have chased after her and made his feelings known. He did not do so; therefore, she could only draw one conclusion. He only wanted to tell her 'how sorry' he was. He was a gentleman and no doubt felt guilty. She didn't want that from him.

She hurried outside and stomped towards a path, determined to walk off the hurt in her aching heart. This was not how she'd envisioned the aftermath of their lovemaking. *This was reality*. She had thought it could only turn out one way, but this was where the growing up and taking responsibility for her impulsive actions was going to take her.

Yes, the Godwin woman had a theory, and she supposed it worked very well in theory, but life didn't always adhere to what 'should be'.

And as though to give truth to the word, she looked up and saw none other than Sir Edward trotting his bay towards her and smiling as though he had just won first prize. At that moment, she wanted to wave a wand and vanish.

He jumped athletically off his horse, in high spirits, and led the horse forward as she tried to force a polite smile. "Why ... Sir Edward ... what brings you here?"

"You," he said softly. "I was in Brighton, and when I heard that you were looking after a sick friend, I immediately called for my horse yesterday and began the journey."

"Oh ... you shouldn't have ... I expect we will be leaving here any day now ..." What the devil was she going to do? She was in no mood to deal with him.

"I had to see for myself that you were well ... and I missed you." His words rang true, and she felt herself blush.

She had to stop him. "Sir Edward ..." she started.

"Ned, do call me Ned," he said softly.

"Ned then ... I think that we should not be out here alone like this." She tried to appeal to his sense of propriety.

"Nevertheless, here we are, and here we must remain for a few moments longer, for I have something to say to you in private."

She took a long drag of air. "And shall I be safe alone out here in your company?" she teased, hoping to lighten the tone.

He laughed. "You are safe in no red-blooded man's company. However, if you think I may lay hands on you against your will, rest easy. I shan't."

She felt a wave of relief, for she did not totally trust Sir Edward. Something about him suggested he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

Appearing bent on making her feel easy, he chatted idly for a moment about the regent and town affairs, at which point he shook his head and said, "The Prince Regent's latest scandal will end badly. He will go insane, like his father before him."

She nodded. "You do have a point. He is forever flitting about from Tory to Whig, and that is very poor politics, but why, sir, do you discuss this with me?" She eyed him quizzically.

"As an example of what happens when one rushes head-on into everything, as you do. Neck-or-nothing paces may end in hurting you, child."

"I didn't know that directness was considered a neck-or-nothing pace," she answered, her dark eyes bright, her chin up.

Damn, but he wanted to tame her. *Certes!* If only she would see how good they could be together. She certainly did amuse him. He chuckled and said, "That is because you lack experience and sagacity."

“Oh really?” Her dark eyes sparkled with the challenge. “This is my third season out, and I rather think I am not totally ignorant.”

“You misunderstand me.” He was enjoying himself immensely. She built his fire and brought him to full awareness. He didn’t want to break her spirit—he rather liked it—but he wanted her spirit loyal to him. “*Passion’s Seed*.” He allowed the title to hang in the air for a moment. “An interesting title, don’t you think?”

“Interesting? No. Explicit, yes,” she answered warily.

“Intriguing as well,” he continued. “In one chapter our author tells us, ‘any woman can make a man fall in love with her; but, ah the woman who can keep him so!’ What do you say, was this penned by a male or a female?” He stared hard into her lovely eyes and saw retreat.

“I understand that the author is a male,” she said lightly.

“How do you understand that?”

“Well, the author pens his name as Felix Gamble ... sounds male to me.” She tried a smile, but it slipped off her face as he reached for her fingers and held them to his lips.

“Hmmm, perhaps, but do you recall Lady Jersey’s weekend affair last year at Middleton? Of course, you must. It was when Holland made a gross fool of himself and took a dive into the goldfish pond.”

She knew what he was driving at; he saw it in her eyes. She knew. He went on. “The scenery, the names all changed. The incident—one and the same.”

“Yes, I remember,” she said in a small voice.

“I rather thought you did, my lady Felix,” he said softly, but he saw by the flash of fear in her eyes that he had hit home.

“Sir Edward ... you don’t realize what you are saying. Do not attempt to slander me in this fashion ...”

He lifted his brow as he put the nails to her coffin. “I don’t think it would be slander, love. You see, I have proof. I have a copy of the contract you signed with Murry. It was all very simple. Murry has a clerk, and clerks are sadly underpaid.”

~ Sixteen ~

MISS BRETTON GAZED at Sir Frederick for a moment. Something in the recesses of his vague blue eyes pulled at her heart. Something was wrong, and it had nothing to do with his injuries.

She had known for days that she was in love with him. She loved the mischief forever lurking about his smile, dancing around his words, and capturing her imagination. He had a gentleness of manner about him that always called to her, and she had been wondering what it would be like to be in his arms.

He had been for some moments flirting and teasing her, but she believed that she had grown to know his mind, and something was troubling him. She was sure of it.

She hoped he had meant it that he was going to apply to her aunt regarding a courtship, but he had suffered a head injury ...

“Corry ... of all women in the world, I trust you to take me at my word,” he said suddenly.

She was surprised by it. “Now what new business is this?”

“I tell you that there is heaven for me in your eyes, and you say ‘nonsense’.”

“It is a very pretty thing to say ... but what does it really mean?” she responded, smiling softly at him.

He reached for her fingers and pulled her off the chair near his bed and onto the bed. “You are a treasure of wisdom, and I am a cad ... a cad, I tell you.”

“Are you? I had not thought it,” she said, forcing herself not to giggle. “Do you mean to bring me low ... ruin me ... take advantage, and be on your way?”

“What?” he shot back, shocked. “May I be struck by lightning before ever I would do such a thing ... no ... that is not it.”

“What then, do you mean to take back your ... er ... sickbed proposal?” she teased, but her heart fluttered in her chest with dread.

“Stop ... stop ... never, but Corry ... you know nothing about me,” he said desperately, one free hand raking his hair.

“What should I know? You are a complex man with a gentle, kind, and oddly mixed personality of contradictions. Very intriguing. You are charming, you are good fun and I—”

He cut her off. "I am not fit to look at your face, hear your sweet voice ..." His voice was full of bitterness.

She saw how very distressed he was and put teasing aside. "Why, Freddy ... what is all this?"

"Have you never heard about me—about the scandal I brought to my name?" he answered, looking away.

"I heard that you were involved in something that caused you a great deal of unhappiness and that you retired to your country home to weather the storm." She smiled sweetly at him and touched his face.

He grabbed her hand with his good one, held it to his cheek, and kissed it feverishly. "I have no right to put you in this situation. The ravages of that scandal would haunt you as well if you became my wife."

She moved away from the bed and sat quietly on the window seat. She didn't want to look at him.

He became desperate and called out to her, "Corry, dearest love ... look at me. Corry, please don't turn your back on me ... *not yet.*"

She turned and went to him. "It grieves me that you think so little of me that I would care what the silly beau monde thinks over my own good opinion. Do you not know me, Freddy?"

He held his arm out to her. "Corry ... love of my life ... Corry ... first you must hear what it is."

"It is nothing," she answered.

"I am a fiend!" he responded.

"Then tell me do, and we shall see if you are so," she said softly and kissed his lips.

He held her neck, put his head to hers, and whispered, "Yes, I shall tell you all ..."

Babs closed her eyes. A bombardment of bile started up in her throat. *He was a fiend.* He meant to blackmail her into something ... but what?

Why was he doing this? She didn't want to open her eyes, but the dark began to swirl, and she felt him put an arm about her. She finally opened her eyes and nearly swooned. She wouldn't, couldn't be brought low by this awful, awful man!

He looked concerned as he steadied her. "Do not fear, darling. I don't mean to hurt you—if I don't have to."

"What ... what made you suspect the book was written by me?"

"I have been watching you ... wanting you. Do you think I would not know you simply because you took the alias of a man?" he answered simply. "There were times when I read the lines and nearly saw you standing there saying the words." He sighed. "That with the fact that I am fully aware you had a few articles published in the ladies magazine ... it wasn't all that difficult to come to the conclusion that you are the mysterious Felix."

She steadied herself. "Right then, have at me. What is it you want?"

"No ... ask me instead, so there can be no misunderstanding, ask me what I want for my silence."

She eyed him doubtfully and said, "I would think that you would remain the gentleman I had always believed you to be ... and that would keep you silent, as you are honor-bound to do."

He laughed without mirth. "Oh, no, honor in this instance means naught to me. You, my delightful Lady Babs, I want you."

She sucked in air. "Me? You want me? I may have scribbled out a novel, my buck, but I am not some wench you can call to your bed with such a threat."

He laughed again and attempted to flick her nose. She pulled roughly away. "Don't dare try to touch me. You are a brute and a scoundrel."

"No, my darling, you mistake ... I want you in my bed, yes, but as my bride."

Her bottom lip dropped. She was angry, but she had to find a way out of this. She had to stall him. "Sir Edward, never say you want a woman you must blackmail into marrying you?"

"You are young and do not know your own mind. You will learn to love me ... and enjoy our union," he said confidently. He eyed her and said, "I cannot be manipulated with words. I cannot be shamed into forgoing what I want. I want you, and I mean to have you. Once you are my wife, you will learn to please me and in so doing will be pleased yourself. You shall see!"

"You villain ... please you ... I will loathe you for forcing me into a loveless marriage," she seethed as she lost control of her temper.

He grabbed her and shook her. "Take care. I have the means to destroy your father. I will say you wrote and published this book with his full knowledge because he was in debt ... I will ruin him and your Aunt Jane!"

She gasped. Could he be so wicked? If she had to be ruined in the eyes of the world she traveled in, so be it, but her father ... her aunt. She couldn't bear the thought of shaming them in this way. She tried one more tactic. "How can you want me? My heart is elsewhere engaged."

"You have a schoolgirl crush on the duke. I am not a fool. You will get over him."

"I will not," she answered softly.

"I will tell him as well. I will make him my first stop ... we will see if he wants you then!" he snapped angrily.

"No! No ... please ... he doesn't know how I feel, and he doesn't want me!" she wailed.

"Doesn't he? More fool he," said Sir Edward. "I cannot imagine a man not wanting you." He reached for her, but she took a hurried step away from him. "Darling, I love you and mean to treat you always with care and attention, as befits my bride ..."

"I don't want to be your bride. You should want someone who wants you

back.” She tried pleading logic. “I am ... unwilling—you cannot want an unwilling bride.”

“So long as that bride is you,” he answered on a hard note.

“Give me time ... I have to think ...” Babs again stalled, hoping to find a way out of this predicament.

He chortled. “No.”

She touched his arm. “Ned ... may I call you Ned?”

“It is my fondest wish that you will do so,” he said on a husky note.

“Then do but hear me out. At least honor me with a few weeks courtship.”

“You already had that and refused me,” he snapped impatiently. He sighed. “However, I will give you a few days time before I send in the announcement of our engagement to the newspapers.”

“A few days ...?” she squeaked. What was she going to do? “You can’t mean to woo me in just a few days?”

“My dear, I don’t mean to woo you at all. I mean to take you.”

She surveyed him coldly. “Do you know, Sir Edward ...” she said, purposely dropping the ‘Ned’, “that a man obsessed with winning does not always find satisfaction with the prize? You might want to remember that when Leander swam the Hellespont, he was a man driven by true love’s hottest blood, but having gone the distance, he was unable to make the girl! This might just turn out the same for you ...” she warned.

He reached out and gripped her arm roughly, and his answer was to bend and take her lips by force. Though he found them soft, though he found her mouth sweet, he also discovered a hellcat. *She bit him.*

He jumped away from her and held his hand to his mouth. “You will never get away with that again.” He shook his head. “I might just end by wishing you and yours ill and whispering your secret to anyone who will listen ... and they will listen!”

She gasped, and he grabbed her again. “Babs, when I am done, your lips will part for mine, and you will whisper my name against my ear.”

“No, Sir Edward, I will not. You take by force that which can never be yours.”

His brows moved and his eyes were slits of fury. “We shall see.” He let her go. “In the meantime, you will inform the duke that you intend to become my bride and that he is no longer welcome at your side.”

“I shall do no such thing,” she snapped back. She was now in tears.

“Won’t you, my love? Then perhaps I shall.” He started to move off.

“Please ...” she called after him. “Sir Edward, it is unnecessary. He has no wish to marry me.”

“And still, I would have him know.” Sir Edward’s gaze was hard and cold.

Lowering her eyes, she tried to stem her tears and prohibit the catch in her throat from oversetting her. “Sir Edward, if it is your wish that the duke be

told such news, then, *yes*, you tell him.”

He was taken aback. He had genuinely wanted the news to come from her. He was doubtful that the duke would believe him. Was that her game?

She smiled, for she could see he meant to call her bluff as he said, “It will give me the greatest pleasure to give him our wonderful news.”

“Sir Edward, it won’t do you any good. I have lost my heart to him, and therefore, you shall never have it,” she told him bluntly.

He fired up but controlled himself. “Is that so? We shall see, for this first round has gone to me, as will all the others in the end.”

She watched him go and leaned back against the oak tree for support. She wanted to sob her heart out, but she needed a clear head. Somehow she pulled herself together and said out loud, “*Do you think so, villain?* I do not ...”

Sir Edward sent his card in for the duke, anticipating the moment when he would deliver the news that Lady Babs had accepted to be his wife. He wanted to rub it into his rival’s face. He wanted this moment of glory almost as much as he wanted the Lady Babs. He stood in the squire’s central hall and twirled his hat about with glee as he waited.

He had seen the look on Lord Wildfire ... huh, Wildfire indeed ... but he had seen the look on his face whenever he glanced at the Lady Babs. This would come as a blow, and he reveled in the notion.

The duke came out to greet him and invited him into the library where there was, he told him, some hot tea.

“I am not here on a social visit, and I don’t require tea,” Sir Edward said grimly.

The duke’s expressive brows rose. “Really? Well then ... I don’t mean to stand here in the drafty hall when we can be more comfortable in the library. Stay or go ... your choice.”

Sir Edward inclined his head and followed the duke into the library, irritated to have lost this first round. He had not wanted this to be more than a slap in the face. He had never liked the duke or understood why the beau monde insisted on fawning over him. The duke’s interest in Babs had spurred Ned to dislike him further. How dare the man cast eyes on the woman of Ned’s choice!

Once in the library, the duke picked up the brandy and tipped it to Sir Edward, who did in fact wish a glass but declined. The duke poured himself a glass and sipped it as he moved towards his desk. Then he set it down to say, “So then, Ned, since this is not a social call ... what the deuce brings you here?” The duke was as ever direct.

Sir Edward decided to take the lead. He put his hat and gloves on a side table and took a seat. He waited for the duke to do the same.

“*Certes*, man, you look as though you mean to challenge me to a duel,” said the duke on a short laugh, remaining where he was.

Sir Edward gave him a crooked smile, because, once again, he had not forced the duke to follow his lead. Instead of sitting, the duke leaned back against the large oak desk and folded his arms across his chest to eye him quizzically. Sir Edward was infuriated still more.

"The matter I am about to discuss with you concerns a lady we both know ... and both have an interest in," said Sir Edward.

"Ah," remarked the duke softly.

Sir Edward still had not gotten the upper hand. There was nothing for it but to dive into the subject full force. "Indeed."

The duke appeared supremely irritated and said, "Get to the point, Ned. I am not noted for patience."

"I am speaking of Lady Barbara. You see, she has this afternoon done me the honor of accepting my suit. I look forward to making her my wife in the very near future." *At last*, thought Sir Edward, watching the duke stand straight up and observing the man's face twitch with doubt, disbelief, and finally anger. *At last, by God, he had upset him.*

Sir Edward had in fact shocked the duke and thrown him off his balance with this piece of unexpected information. He could not—*would not*—believe a word of it.

After his initial agitation, he was more curious than anything else. "Ned, I am puzzled though, for while I am pleased to share your fortunate news, I am at a loss to understand why it is that you should ride out of your way to advise me of it."

"I could not help but notice ... your interest in the Lady Babs these past weeks ... and today as I arrived at the inn, I noticed you riding off and assumed you had visited with her."

"You shouldn't make such assumptions."

"Really, well, so that you can have no doubt, I wanted you to be aware of how matters stand," Sir Edward said glibly.

"I see," said the duke, who did not see at all. *This didn't make sense.* He rather thought that Babs disliked Sir Edward. This was too sudden ... and after they had shared ... no, he didn't believe any of this. Just what was Ned up to?

"Therefore, under the circumstances, I felt it incumbent upon myself to present the news to you in person."

"*Did you?* That is what I don't understand. I would have read your news in the papers eventually."

"As to that, we don't plan on putting it in the papers for ten days or so."

"*Really?* Odd that. If Babs had decided to be mine, I would be shouting it from the rooftops." Now why had he said that? Something didn't fit. This was all wrong. Babs would never accept to marry Sir Edward ... she simply wouldn't, and one of those reasons had to be her connection to him ... to what

they shared. Damn, she was *his*, no other's—*his*!

“As to that, we thought we would keep it a family matter for just awhile ...” Sir Edward tried explaining.

The duke eyed him doubtfully. Nothing rang true, and Lord Wildfire was on the alert. He fancied he rather knew *his Babs*, and suddenly, clearly, he realized that he would not allow this to go forward. He was damned certain she wouldn't run from his arms into Sir Edward's. Of that he was certain.

Indeed, he thought as his eyes narrowed. His mind filled with his intricate cogitations, for he could see that Sir Edward was playing a deep game ... but what exactly?

~ *Seventeen* ~

“IF YOU WON’T tell your father—tell Aunt Jane. She will know how to deal with the scoundrel!” Corry wagged a finger at Babs, who had confessed her situation to her.

“I cannot ...” Babs felt the tears start up and turned away from her cousin.

Corry stood over her, and Babs was surprised at the level of anger her cousin was exhibiting. Corry never stamped her feet, but she presently stamped her foot very hard and made a very strange noise. “Ughggg ...”

Babs adored her cousin, but she could not take her well-meant advice.

“Babs,” Corry said, sitting beside her on the bed and touching her hand, “listen to me in this ... for once, don’t rush head-on into matters. Aunt Jane, for all her fussing and stuffiness, is a knowing one. She is vastly experienced and will know what to do with this problem. We may not see an easy solution ... but don’t discount Aunt Jane’s ability to handle Sir Edward in fine style. She wouldn’t want you to marry a man to stave off a scandal. She will know what to do.”

“*No!* How can I do that to her ... put such a burden on her?” wailed Babs, distraught. “And besides, she would feel it her duty to tell Papa, who would forbid the marriage and take on society full score. He, Aunt Jane ... even perhaps you ... all ruined because of me.”

“Babs, the beau monde will chew one scandal today, another tomorrow, and besides, do you think any of us gives a monkey for this silly London society? The leaders of the *ton* are fools!” snapped Corry.

“I ... I cannot ...” Babs wrung her hands.

“*Love* is hanging in the balance. You ... you cannot love Sir Edward, and therefore, you must *not* marry him. Babs, you cannot allow yourself to be defeated in this way. *You* have been the one always going on about love and love and love ... and here you are throwing it all away for what? He is blackmailing you into marriage!” Corry shook her fist with the agitation she felt and got to her feet again. “You are far too strong-willed to be beaten in this fashion!”

“I am not beaten—I may yet find a way out of this muddle. ’Tis why I insisted on time before making an announcement, *but faith*, Corry ... I cannot allow my family to be ruined. Papa enjoys his cronies, his club ... his *silly London society*.”

“And what of your Lord Wildfire? Do you throw what you feel for him away? How can you?”

“Love is a fleeting emotion ...” Babs looked away. Her heart always felt a wrenching discomfort when she thought of the duke who didn’t even want her. She hadn’t told Corry how far she had gone with her beloved Wildfire.

“What fustian are you spouting now? We both know how you feel about the duke. So tell me, Babs, can you allow Sir Edward to hold you, kiss you, touch you—make love to you—”

“Stop, stop, or I will be sick!” Babs cried as she stood up and began pacing the room and wringing her hands.

“I will not stop. It is the very thing you must consider ... your love for your Wildfire. You have kissed your Wildfire ... how can you go to Sir Edward’s marriage bed?”

“Mercy,” Babs said with a sob. “You do have a way of bringing it home, don’t you? So passionate, Corry ... I had not thought my quiet, lovely cousin could show so much fire.” She tried turning it into a tease.

Corry was having none of that. “You need to be saved from your impulsive neck-or-nothing self. You need to tell Aunt Jane—”

A knock sounded at their door, and Corry eyed her cousin. “Are you all right?” Lady Jane said, her voice filled with doubt on the other side of the door.

Babs nodded and called out, “Y-es?”

The door opened, and Lady Jane put in her head.

“Your father asked me to advise you that we all leave for Brighton in the morning. He will brook no argument in this. He was with Sir Frederick earlier, and both of them feel the short trip will do him no harm. His carriage of course is still being repaired, but he will travel with me and your father in the coach.” She sent a look from one girl to the other and asked, “Is there something wrong, my darlings?”

Babs had a sudden urge to run into her aunt’s arms and say yes, yes, her world was broken. She managed a brave smile and said, “Naught ... all is well.”

Aunt Jane looked at Corry, who lowered her gaze, and said, “I see ...” Then she smiled and added, “Corrine, it would appear you and I have something to discuss, and though I don’t mean to bother you about it just yet, when we are comfortable in Brighton, we shall get to it.”

“Yes, Aunt Jane,” Miss Bretton said carefully.

Babs looked from her aunt to her cousin but refrained from inquiring about this. She could see her aunt looking at them speculatively. Corry was of course quite correct—her aunt was a knowing woman.

They waited for the door to close and looked at one another before Corry began nagging her cousin once more. “Babs, dearest ... tell her ...”

Babs closed her eyes and saw her Wildfire, his blue eyes bright ... gone from her forever, and she burst into tears.

The drive to Brighton was a pleasant one and served to banish some of Babs' worry for a time. She exerted herself to entertain the crowded little group in the coach while her father played at outrider at the back of their carriage.

Sir Frederick had hired the inn's wagon and driver to deliver his baggage, and this lumbered along behind Lord Waverly.

Lady Babs had convinced herself that she would not break down. She meant first to try and talk some sense into Sir Edward. Failing that, she had to find a way out of this mess. She just had to.

She put on a very good smile with only her cousin the wiser, although Babs caught her aunt studying her from time to time.

They stopped first at Sir Frederick's lodgings. Lord Waverly walked him to his door, where his man opened the door wide with a genuine greeting of pleasure.

Their own lodgings were within walking distance, and both Corry and Babs got out and took the walk to stretch. They told their aunt, who indulgently allowed it to be a very good thing.

They reached the front door and found Maudly flinging it wide. "Oh, pleased I am you be here ..." She looked past them for the coach, saw Lord Waverly helping his sister alight, and sighed. "Come in ... come in ... there has been a gentleman caller who was very insistent. Sir Edward—and he said he would return later in the day ..."

Corry and Babs exchanged looks, and Maudly eyed them knowingly. "Ah, as I thought. Shall I tell him you are abovestairs sleeping when he calls?"

"No, Maudly, I had better receive him," said Babs grimly.

Thus, it was that they had only been installed in the lodgings for an hour when Sir Edward did indeed call and request to be taken to Lady Babs.

Maudly pulled a face but led him to the sitting room, where Corry and Babs were poring over some fashion magazine.

Sir Edward entered the room in his usual style. His curls were all in place, and his cutaway of blue superfine fit his trim figure, as did his embroidered blue on white waistcoat.

Corry appeared to be on high alert and determined to snub Sir Edward. "Ah ... Sir Edward," she said in a tone that discouraged any welcome. Babs turned an anxious look to her, for it wouldn't do to goad him just then.

He seemed, however, unaware or unwilling to note the coldness in the air from both her cousin and herself. He bent over Corry's hand, which she reluctantly allowed.

"Miss Bretton, what a delight you are to the sight. Blue becomes you," he said, referring to her pretty muslin day gown.

She inclined her head and said quietly, "Thank you, Sir Edward. Would you join us for tea? I can have Maudly bring in another cup." The words were

polite, but they held no warmth.

His eyes seemed basilisk to Babs as he turned to her. She could see Corry watching him and bolstered herself to be brave.

His voice was hard when he answered Corry, and he was already moving closer to Babs. "No, thank you. As a matter of fact ... I was hoping to convince your cousin to come for a ride with me in my phaeton." He bent over Babs' hand, and his lips lingered on her wrist, which she pulled sharply away. He eyed her, and she felt the warning in those eyes. "I know how much you enjoy the sea ..." He turned to Corry. "And of course ... you are welcome to join us."

"No," Corry shot back a bit more stiffly than was polite, and Babs watched the two stare at each other. Corry had made no secret of the fact that she thought Sir Edward the greatest villain on earth, and Babs half expected something awful to come out of her cousin's mouth.

Hurriedly she interjected, "I fear my cousin is tired from the journey today ... as I am."

"The salt air will do you good, and I shan't keep you above an hour ..." Sir Edward coaxed.

Perhaps she should go with him? It would afford her an opportunity to show him what he was doing was ill fated.

"Yes ... perhaps the salt air will clear the mind," she said as she made up hers. She got to her feet. "I'll just be a moment—must fetch my spencer and bonnet."

"I'll wait for you in the hall," said Sir Edward, bending stiffly to Corry, who was giving him an awful stare and one that Babs could see made him uncomfortable. She almost giggled as she went off.

A few moments later, Babs sat quietly in the open phaeton while Sir Edward chatted about the scenery and recent literary works in his droll and unalarming manner. She was thankful that he seemed determined to be pleasant. Perhaps ... perhaps he could be dissuaded from the course he had set for her?

However, when he quoted something she found absurd, she looked at him sideways and remarked, if only to bring up the subject uppermost on her mind, "Well, if you are going to quote the *Quarterly's* review on poor Rodgers, then you must remember what they wrote about *my work*." There—it was out, and she meant to tease him with it. She wanted a reaction.

He looked at her as he wielded his high-stepping team through the light traffic along the coast road and said, "By God, woman! You have a knack of catching a man unawares." With that he burst into laughter.

She hadn't wanted to entertain him. She had wanted to show him that scandal could follow him if he aligned himself with her and she was ever found out. She rather thought it would matter to him.

He sobered as she glanced at him and tried to think what next she could use. Then he said gravely, so much at variance with the laughter she had just

heard, “The *Quarterly* did not realize they were reviewing a female’s work when they looked kindly on *Passion’s Seed*.”

Ah, she thought, *here we go*. “No, they did not know, but the words are out—they have been read. They wrote that it was an elegant piece—a wonderful love story that depicted our Prince Regent’s set in all its glory.” She eyed him thoughtfully. “As I recall, Papa told me that the Regent was very flattered.”

“And I repeat, they did not know that a woman had penned it. The Regent did not know it was written by one of his own. One does not spy on their friends and then put it to paper.”

“Unless it flatters the Prince Regent,” she said. “Which I was very careful to do ... I wonder if he would mind, that it was penned by a woman ...?” she mused out loud. “I have a mind to apply to him and confide my secret ...”

He pulled the horses to the side of the road and turned on her. “You will do no such thing!”

“And why not? Would that make things awkward for you, Sir Edward? You wouldn’t want a wife who is whispered about ... would you?”

He eyed her. “You are bluffing.”

“I am not. I have on many occasions had very enjoyable conversations with the Prince, and while my father is not in his first circle, we always find our names on his invitation list. I think that he would be most amused.”

“You take a great risk. You wrote this book for the masses to read our secrets and laugh at our peccadilloes. A woman will not easily be forgiven what a man of rank and wealth would be allowed,” he said on a triumphant note.

“And still ... I might be willing to risk it. Does that not tell you how desperate I am not to be your wife!” she snapped at him.

“You are being emotional. It is all well and good for you to risk your own comfort in society ... must you also risk your family’s?”

“I am not the one doing this to them! You are. In fact, you went out of your way to discover my secret and lay it bare. Do you think I will ever forgive you?”

“Your eyes ... so dark and full with light ... Do you not understand how I love you?”

“’Tis not love, Edward ... love is sacrifice, love is caring more about the object of your affections than yourself. You want ... you lust ... you *do not* love.”

“You are wrong and too naïve to understand. We are meant to be together, and I will bring this about.”

Her gloved hand fluttered as it went to her heart. He caught it and held it to his own heart. “Do you feel that? It beats for you, my darling ... it wants only you ... would risk all to have you.”

“You *are* risking all. You are throwing your soul to the wind ... What you are doing is wrong ...”

The Duke of Barrington sat astride his fidgeting gelding and watched from a row of trees that lined the road. The breakers beating against the sand were at his back, and if blood ever raced and bubbled, it did so in his veins at that precise moment. He was riveted by the picture of what appeared to be two lovers in the throes of a quarrel.

His heart ached with doubts. His mind reeled against the vision. He could almost see Babs' dark eyes flash, but then he *did see something* ...

She looked like a caged kitten about to claw its way out of a corner.

What the deuce was going on?

He was already in a foul mood. He had just come from Sir Frederick's lodgings and had endured Freddy's chatter about the ride he'd had with Babs, Miss Bretton, and the dry-witted Lady Jane.

He had managed to inquire casually if Lady Babs seemed to be in spirits, and Freddy had answered, "Babs? Odd that you should ask that."

"Oh, and why, may I ask?"

"Because I couldn't put m'finger on it, but, Nick, she didn't seem herself at all ... and if I didn't know better, I would swear her eyes were red from crying. I remarked on her eyes looking a bit red, and she said it was the flowers ... but ..."

"Perhaps she was a bit under the weather," Nick had responded, but he hadn't been able to banish the sick feeling that swept through him.

"Well, I asked Corry ... Miss Bretton what was towards with Babs, for I tell you, though she tried damnably to hide it, something was wrong."

"And what did Miss Bretton have to say?"

"Well, you see, Miss Bretton and I are, I hope, I believe, reaching an understanding and are therefore on ... comfortable terms—"

"Damnation man, though I am pleased to hear it, do tell me what she thought about the Lady Babs!" snapped Lord Wildfire, losing the patience he had been trying desperately to maintain.

Freddy had eyed him curiously for a moment and said, "Aye ... she told me that her cousin was suffering from a terribly tight situation, but before she could finish, we were interrupted, you see, and she was unable to tell me the rest."

Freddy's words had nagged at him, and now, here she was, looking as though she were about to cry and trying very hard not to do so. In fact, it appeared as though she were pleading for her life ...

What a muddle he was in. What should he do?

Time to cut the couple off before Sir Edward took up the reins. Why not? Perhaps he would use this moment to pay his respects to the bride ... and see what he could see.

One thing, however, nagged at his brain: the question of why.

Why the devil should he care if she was the sort to turn her back on their

intimacy and go to another's bed? Why should he bother?

A moment later he cantered up the sandy hill to the road so he was alongside the parked phaeton. He tipped his hat and called out a jovial greeting.

He caught the look that came into Babs' eyes, and it sucked the breath out of his lungs. He was dashed finished, he told himself. He had his answer to his questions.

He urged his horse to her side of the vehicle as he gave Sir Edward a perfunctory nod and took his hat off to Babs. "To the Lady Babs," he said quietly. "May I extend my congratulations and wish you happy?"

Her face froze with shock as she turned and stared at Sir Edward and seemed to make up her mind. "If that is what you wish to do," she said on a defeated note.

"Babs, sweetheart ... what is this?" He spoke only to her, heedless that Sir Edward's face had taken on color.

She brought those luscious, dark eyes of hers up to his face and silently implored him for help. How could he help her when he didn't know why she had accepted to marry Sir Edward—especially after their lovemaking?

"You see, Nick ... sometimes we appear to be what we are not. Sometimes we must do *not* what we want, but what we must, and those of us that can ... make the best of it." She said this last with a catch in her throat, and the duke had the very strong urge to take Sir Edward by the throat and strangle him.

"This is all very touching," Sir Edward interjected dryly. "But I must see my lady home." He nodded curtly and whipped his horses off.

Lord Wildfire sat his horse and watched them draw away down the avenue. Lady Babs turned once and cast him a soulful look. Something in the droop of her shoulders seemed to suggest she was acknowledging defeat.

What did all this mean? Was she being constrained to marry Sir Edward? Was Ned offering such a price to her father that he could not refuse in the face of his debts?

No, by damn, she wasn't marrying Ned—or anyone else for that matter!

~ Eighteen ~

LADY BABS LOOKED around the Alvanleys' ballroom with a heavy sigh. She had been thinking long and hard about doing just what she had told Sir Edward she would do. She would approach the Prince ...

Brighton was ablaze with the hedonistic *ton*. The seaside town had been brought into fashion by the Prince Regent when he chose it for his Royal Pavilion, and he was very prominent at the moment with his collection of intimates surrounding him.

Otto stood at Bab's side, pointing out first one and then another woman who had chosen to wear a gown he found appalling. She managed to laugh and told him he was very naughty, but her heart wasn't in it as she scanned the crowd of guests for but one person.

Otto led her onto the floor, but as they were continually bumped by other dancers, he took her hand and led her off. "You will be bruised trying to dance with that squeeze of people bumping us at every turn ..."

Babs smiled absently up at him, happy for his company, which Sir Edward seemed resigned to allow.

Otto touched her chin. "You are very lovely. Your choice of gown, the white with the black embroidery at the bodice, is very fetching and suits you with its simplicity."

"Does it," she said automatically. "That is nice."

"Dash it, Babs, what the deuce is wrong?"

"Wrong? Why, Otto what could be wrong?"

"My question—you have but to answer."

He was her dear, sweet friend. Most people would not have noticed her distress, she told herself. Could she confide in Otto? Should she burden him with such a secret? He would take her part. He would rage and fume, but in the end ... what could he do?

"Nothing is wrong ... perhaps I am tired from the long, boring day." She patted his arm.

He was not convinced. "You do not fool me, Babs ... something is wrong, and you are not tired ... pale, yes, but tired, no."

"Stop it, do, or you shall have me worried about my appearance, and then something will be wrong." She allowed him a bright smile; though she had wanted to give him a laugh, she was unable to summon one.

Sir Edward approached and won a dark frown from Otto.

“May I lead you out for a dance ...?” Sir Edward ignored the count as he spoke softly to Babs.

She lowered her gaze and put her hand on his extended forearm.

“It is a squeeze on the floor ...” Otto complained.

“I know well how to protect my lady,” answered Sir Edward with a sneer.

He bent and whispered in her ear, “I see the good count is determined to watch over you.”

“With gentlemen such as yourself lurking about and ready to pounce, ’tis no wonder!” she answered roughly.

“Oooh, the lady’s tongue is sharp tonight.” He smiled at her, appearing not in the least disturbed by her bad humor.

“Do you find the truth ... sharp?” she pursued irritably, her gaze shooting darts of fury at him.

“Babs,” he said gravely, “the truth is that you will be mine, so accept it. Learn to enjoy what can be.” With his white-gloved hand tightly on her waist, he spun her to the beat of the waltz and then towards the garden doors. He bent his head close to her ear and said, “In the end, you will find yourself in my bed ... and enjoying your place as my wife.”

She blanched. The effrontery of the man. How dare he ... how ... but if she did not do something soon, that would be her fate. She wanted to slap his face and tell him to do his worst. A scene ... it would create a scene, and then he would ruin her family for revenge. However, the fighter in her came to the fore. “Accept it? You mistake your power, sir. You would have to find yourself a mighty philter, for it will take nothing less for me to accept it. You may make me your wife ... but do you think you can force me to your bed ...?”

“You haven’t a choice in the matter,” he said grimly.

“Ah, but I do ... will you ruin my reputation then, sir? Will you tell all the world your wife penned *Passion’s Seed* ... will you?”

“No, I will have you in the end, my way—even if I have to muster up a love potion to do it.”

“A love potion? A ball and chain is not a love potion, and that is how I will always perceive my connection to you.”

Anyone intimate with Babs would have noticed if they happened to glance her way that she was undergoing some emotional strain. Therefore, Corry, who had been watching her cousin, broke off her conversation with Sir Frederick to exclaim, “Freddy, I wish you were able to dance.”

“Would love to accommodate you, my dear, broken arm n’all,” he offered devotedly with a gallant bow.

“No, no—I mean to save Babs,” she answered with some distress.

“Why?” asked a strong male voice at her back. “Is Lady Babs in need of saving?”

Corry looked around and saw the duke, tall and solemn, stepping purposely forward. He did not bother to smile a greeting.

Corry attempted a light rejoinder, uncertain just what she should say to him. "I was just remarking that my cousin looks a bit ... fatigued."

"Were you?" He looked thoughtfully at Lady Babs. "She looks spirited—flushed in fact—but certainly not fatigued."

"Indeed," Sir Frederick stuck in, looking from his friend to his beloved. "I think Lady Babs needs a bit of fresh air." He smiled sweetly at his love. "Shall I take her off, my dear ...? Will you join me?"

"No need," the duke said. "You may continue to attend to Miss Bretton, Freddy. *I'll* see to Lady Babs!"

The duke had suddenly made up his mind. Something was wrong, he knew that, but what it was he couldn't tell. However, he was not about to allow Sir Edward to browbeat the woman of his heart. She wasn't going to marry Ned—damnation, no, because she was going to marry him.

He told himself that he had the experience and the skill to handle all that life threw at him, but he would never be able to handle life itself without the Lady Babs in it at his side. Somehow she had found a way to get under his skin, into his blood, and was the reason his heart pounded.

He tapped Sir Edward's shoulder. The waltz was nearly at an end, and as Sir Edward turned to see who wished to interrupt, a smile froze on his face.

"Nick," he said on a hard note. "A bit late, aren't you?"

"No, I don't think so. I rather think I am just in time." Creating a scene would only embarrass Babs, so he made a show of laughing and said, "Here, give over gracefully. You will have her all to yourself soon enough, Ned."

Sir Edward had no choice. He couldn't very well create a scene. He would be laughed at as a fool, and Lord Wildfire knew it. He watched Sir Edward bow himself off, a slight sneer marring his smile.

And then Wildfire, true to his name, lost no time.

He easily, deftly steered Babs out of Sir Edward's view. Before she could question, or object, he had her slender arm and was at the ballroom door pulling her out into the courtyard and the warm night air.

Outdoors, he took a moment to bring his thoughts together. Babs looked up at the stars and said softly, "Beautiful ..."

He looked meaningfully at her. "Exquisite."

When she looked up and into his eyes, he felt like a boy. Her dark eyes held a shine, held a look of love, and thrilled him. The air was intoxicating with the sweet scents of early summer blossoms. A breeze wafted by touched with salt and was refreshing after the tight quarters in the small ballroom. The fresh green landscape, the torches, and his beloved ...

He was overcome with need and love and desire. She had wrapped her fingers around his soul and made it hers. She said his name softly, and like a

fool all he could say was, “Babs ... my love ... my everything ...”

He crushed her into his arms, and at first his kiss was a gentle brushing of her full lips with a light touch of his own. Then he felt her tongue lick at his bottom lip, and he parted her delicious lips so that his tongue could join hers. One kiss turned into two, and then he was taking her shoulders and setting her apart from him.

Her dark eyes looked up at him questioningly, and he groaned. “Babs, beloved girl, I want you, but not like this—not when you are in trouble and desperate and don’t know where to turn ... so *turn to me*.”

She frowned up at him and lowered her eyes. “I did not say I was in trouble ...”

“And yet I know that you are. Tell me, why have you told Ned you would marry him? It makes no sense to me.”

Her eyes were so dark, and suddenly a tear rolled down her cheek. “Because I have to ...”

“You have to?” he nearly shouted back. “Why in thunder do you have to? Is it money? Does your father need the money—has Ned offered to pay off his debts?”

She shook her head. “No, it isn’t the money ... now ... not a problem with money.”

“Then, love ... sweet love ... tell me. Trust me. If you are trying to protect your father, I shall immediately make all the financial arrangements —”

She cut him off with a finger in front of his face. “*No!* You cannot buy me for a mistress. How can you suggest such a thing?”

He laughed, but it was short-lived. “How can you think that is what I am offering?”

“What else must I think?”

“Babs, my own dear sweet Babs. I did not think I was ready for marriage ... am not quite ready for marriage, but I still wish to protect you.”

She eyed him with a shake of her head, but once again he was kissing her, and this time *she* pulled away.

“This is madness,” he said out loud, for he’d decided to do something he would have considered unthinkable madness even two weeks ago. Despite not considering himself ready for marriage, despite not having observed the niceties of asking her father’s blessing, even despite her supposed engagement to Ned, he was going to propose.

“Very sweet, but forgive me if I do not appreciate the eloquence of the scene,” said Sir Edward, coming up on them.

Nick saw his beloved’s face. She appeared devastated. Their moment together had been shattered. He had to do something, and he had to do it immediately. Just what was Sir Edward using to get Babs to marry him? He stepped in front of Lady Babs and confronted Ned. “The fact is, I am not inclined to forgive you ...”

Sir Edward moved towards him ominously. "*I could bury you for this!*"

"You are more than welcome to try ..." offered the duke, very much ready for a fight.

Babs touched Wildfire's arm. "Nick?" Her voice was scarcely above a whisper.

He realized if they were not careful they would attract attention. He did not want his love's name bandied about. He patted her gloved hand reassuringly. "I am certain, however—" He stared Sir Edward down. "—that we may give one another satisfaction in this matter at another appropriate time."

"You are right, of course," returned Sir Edward, and the duke could see the fury in his eyes. However, Sir Edward bent his arm to Babs. "My lady, you will come with me." It was said in a tone that would brook no argument.

Babs cast the duke one quick glance that seemed to beg him not to interfere as she placed her hand on Sir Edward's arm and allowed him to lead her away.

He stood and watched them reenter the ballroom. He had done absolutely nothing to help her. This was more than he could bear. What hold did Ned have over her? Why would she go away with him so meekly? That was not like her. What should he do? *Damn it all to blazes*, he had to do something and soon!

~ Nineteen ~

AFFAIRS HAD PROGRESSED quite comfortably for Miss Bretton and Sir Frederick. It was noted amongst his friends that ‘dear Freddy’ was looking his old self again and that he seemed happier than he had been in two years.

Miss Bretton twirled her parasol happily as she enjoyed a ride in Sir Frederick’s open curricule. He had neglected to bring either a tiger or a driver, thinking himself capable of handling the reins, even with his broken arm, but at some point he’d discovered that was not the case.

Miss Bretton put away her parasol and said in some concern as they narrowly avoided steering his single horse off the road, “Freddy ... oh my poor Freddy ... would you trust me with the reins?”

“I shall have to, for I certainly no longer trust myself. Thought I could manage with the one good arm, but I suppose it will take practice.”

She laughed. “No need for it. You will be healed in no time.”

She took the reins. After a few moments she wielded the curricule through a tricky turn, and Sir Frederick said with deep admiration, “It appears that I am in love with a notable whip!”

She turned her head to look at him, and he reprimanded her, saying warningly, “Careful now, or I shall have to take that back. You nearly ran that poor old woman down.”

“Take what back,” she returned teasingly, her gaze back on the road. “That I am an accomplished whip or that you find after all that you are not in love with me?”

He took the reins from her and managed to pull his horse to a stop at the curbing. Then he turned to face her fully. “Corry ... I won’t even joke about it. Corry ...” He touched her chin as she blushed and looked away. “Look into my eyes ... there, that is it,” he said on a soft note. “I love you with every thought, I love you with every breath, I love you forever ... but will you love me when I tell you what I have done?”

“Yes,” she said at once. “I feel the same about you Freddy ... as you do about me. You are who you are, and I know you, and knowing you, I know you have done nothing wrong.”

“I have tried to tell you about my past. I find that I cannot allow this to go on ... you must hear me out.”

“Very well,” she said, surprising herself. “Then please, sir, take me home. I will hear nothing against you.”

“Grow up, my only love, grow up. You must be told, and I must be the one to do the telling.”

She caved. She could see he was desperate to tell her. “Right then, have at it—but know this, I do not care about your past. It is the present and the future that matter to me. If you tell me you were a murderer, I will say: ‘Oh, were you? You must not be one any longer.’” She took his hand. “So then ... what awful thing have you done?”

He blanched at her analogy and snatched his hand away. “But, Corry, I am a murderer.”

“What?” she nearly shrieked. “You—I don’t believe it. You are the gentlest man I have ever known.”

“I was involved with a young woman two and a half years ago. I was not in love, and I don’t think she was either. In fact, I was told she was seeing other ... gentlemen while she and I...” He shook his head. “I ... she ... we ...” He sighed heavily. “That I should have to tell my innocent love—”

“She became pregnant. I have traveled from the States to London and have seen a few things, Freddy. I may be innocent, but I am not dumb.”

“Yes, she came to me and told me that she was with child and insisted I marry her.”

“Who was she?”

“It doesn’t matter ... I was a beast. She was the daughter of a cit—a tradesman—and I was not in love. I told her I would take care of her ... take her away to have the baby and return her in style. I told her that she could say her husband was killed in the war ... I ...” He shook his head. “I was a cad.”

“But not a murderer,” Corry said simply.

“And not the father of her child, either. She ran after me when I left her, and she climbed up into my curricule. She sat there with me and told me all. She said she had planned this with her lover ... that the child was his, and she and he meant to go off together, if I paid her an agreeable sum.” He closed his eyes. “I should have just said yes, but I was incensed and said I would not pay her a farthing ...”

She waited as he paused.

“Then ... the world went fuzzy ... it all happened so quickly. She stood up in the carriage and said she would shout it to the world that I was the father ... and that I had better pay her anything she wanted.” He looked at Corry then. “The milk wagon in front of us jerked, swerved out of the way of something, I know not what, and my carriage horse nearly bolted. We were jostled about as I tried to gain control, and she went flying out of the curricule and head-on into traffic. She was killed instantly ...”

“Oh Freddy ... oh dearest ...” Corry put her arms around him. “Not your fault. She was a criminal ... and she caused her own demise. It wasn’t your fault. Standing in a curricule,” She clucked her tongue. “And for that ... you have suffered these two years and more?”

“I felt guilty all the same. If I had just agreed to pay her ... she would not

have become enraged and stood up ...”

“Freddy ... my love ...”

“There will always be some who will whisper about it ... say there goes Sir Frederick, who managed to get away with the murder of his mistress.”

“Nonsense. If someone says such a thing, they aren’t a friend, and what do we want with such as that? No ... it means naught. Those that know you didn’t have to be there to know you did nothing wrong.”

“Corry ... oh Corry ...” he said attempting to check his passion.

She kissed his lips lightly and drew away to take up the reins. “Let us not give those gossip mongers anything else to chew on, though.” A short laugh escaped her, and then she said, “I am so worried about my Babs.”

“Why? Can you confide in me? Perhaps I may be able to help?”

“She is being compelled to marry Sir Edward against her will.”

“Is she? I had not thought Lord Waverly ... well, he seems to dote on her ...”

“No, it isn’t her father who compels her. It is Sir Edward. He is blackmailing her into this union.”

“Blackmailed?” Freddy returned, shocked. “Dashed if I know how he could do that?”

“Oh ... would that I could tell you!” she wailed.

Sir Charles patted his horse’s neck and eased him away from the park’s traffic. He looked at the duke with some concern. “Nick? I say, Nick, are you attending me?”

“What? Yes, of course. You think we should leave Brighton immediately. Heard you. Leave without a word to anyone and make our way back to London to scotch an assassination plot against the Prince Regent.”

Sir Charles opened his eyes wide. “Well, I must say you are taking the news rather oddly. I tell you that a plot to kill our Prince is underway, and you behave as though it is the merest commonplace.”

“Do I? That is because I believe the information you have received to be without foundation.”

“Since when have I ever been an alarmist?” Sir Charles sounded offended.

“Dash it, man, didn’t you find it odd ... out of the blue, without prior intelligence, that this piece of news came into your hands?”

Charles frowned. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I did find it odd ... but can’t be ignored, you know.”

“Yes, but the Regent is here in Brighton—”

“No, he left this morning for an emergency meeting at the Home Office. We arranged for him to travel incognito.”

The duke barked a laugh. “What costume did he wear this time?”

“He wanted to dress up as a Spanish count, but we rather thought he

would do better to appear to be a groom. He didn't like that one bit."

"No, I imagine he will reach the Home Office in a very bad humor." The duke chuckled over the vision of his Prince in rags.

"So then, do we go together?" Charles pursued.

"Satisfy me on this—does Sidmouth know about this supposed threat to Prinny?"

"Nick, really! Do you think I would have come to you to join me in this if Sidmouth had not specifically requested you be brought in?"

The duke sighed. This was the worst possible timing. He had planned on visiting Lady Babs and getting to the heart of the problem without Sir Edward hovering about.

In fact, he had meant to get on one knee and tell her that he damned well didn't want to live without her as his wife, even if the word *wife* frightened and thrilled him all at once.

Charles said, "Nick ... whatever ails you?"

"There is someone I must see before we leave."

"Ah, I thought as much. Babs."

"Have I been so transparent?"

Sir Charles grinned. "I know you, Nick ... and I fancy I know Babs. You two were an inevitable match ... Lord help you both."

"Do I take that for approval or warning?" The duke grinned.

"Both, because if I couldn't have her as wife, might as well have her as a cousin."

"Well, you shan't have her for either if we don't conclude our business in London quickly."

"Why?" Sir Charles' eyes narrowed.

"The lady in question has been persuaded to accept Sir Edward's suit," said the duke grimly.

"What?" It was a shout. "Impossible. Babs doesn't even like him!"

"That is what I thought, but I had the news from Ned himself."

"Confirmed by Babs?" Charles obviously could not believe this.

"In a manner of speaking," the duke answered thoughtfully. "That is why I have to see her before we leave."

"Not wise. You will end in telling her you don't go to London for another woman, and Babs will wheedle the truth out of you, and we are not in a position to give her the truth."

"But ... I must see her," the duke objected. "Or I don't go."

Sir Charles gaped at him with a fascinated eye. "Here is Lord Wildfire, rakehell of hearts, pining to answer to a woman, a chit of a woman!"

"Not answer to her ... keep her for my own," the duke corrected.

"Well then, jot off a note ... ambiguous as may be."

"Will it do?"

"He can't very well whisk her off to the altar in the few days we shall be in London. After all, there hasn't even been an announcement, let alone, a

posting of the banns.”

“Right then ...” The duke knew precisely what he would write.

~ Twenty ~

LADY BABS WANDERED about the house and stopped by the open dining room window. At her back soft candlelight glowed, and through the window the soft fragrance of summer floated in the air.

The dining room doors opened, and she turned to greet her aunt's guests as they wandered inside and took their places according to their name cards.

How Sir Edward had wrangled an invitation was more than she could fathom, since her aunt had remarked that she didn't trust the fellow's eyes.

However, he glanced her way and smiled as he took his seat, and Babs was thankful that her seat was across the table from him. She found a deep-seated loathing had taken over her feelings when she looked his way.

Her day had been awful. She had gone into the park with Otto and had hoped to see the duke, but he was nowhere in sight. Sir Edward was, though, and he took it upon himself to join her and Otto, thus ruining her day.

Now, here he was again.

She simply had to find a way short of murder that would get rid of him! Murder? Hmmm ... no, she couldn't—could she?

Lady Jane's watchful eyes rarely missed anything. She was fairly certain that Sir Edward held some kind of threat over her niece. No doubt, she thought, Babs had done some foolish thing, and he had perhaps threatened to go to her father with it if she did not ... if she did not ... what? Jane was certain that he held something over Babs' dear head; she would not otherwise have accepted his suit. Even her brother was not pleased. He remarked to her that something was wrong and that it wasn't like Babs to marry for money, and he could see no other reason why she had accepted Sir Edward.

She had not planned on inviting him until her brother's friend Banbridge asked her to, and she found herself without a reason to refuse—in fact, she was rather obligated to include him, since Babs had accepted him.

Now here he was, staring at her poor niece and making her dashed uncomfortable. She wouldn't have it. The girl was a trial, yes, but a dear creature whom she loved, and she would not have her badgered by the man. Babs didn't want him, and Jane meant to put a halt to it. First, however, she would have to find out just how he had forced her niece into this position.

At least she had had the forethought to seat Otto beside her niece. The

count always seemed to be able to make her laugh.

Otto was at that moment leaning into Babs and telling her jovially, "Prinny was only just saying the other night that this author, the one that wrote that outrageous novel, had made himself immortal. Said he preferred it over every other Gothic he had ever read and means to discover who the author is so that he may thank him personally."

"Really," returned Babs, who though she might stop breathing. "I have always preferred the works of a man like Walter Scott."

"You are no doubt referring to *Marmion*, which has always held a special fascination for me." Sir Edward directed his next words to the woman seated beside him, rather than across the table. "The notion of a knight riding hard to take up his intended bride and escape with her under the noses of all her family is most ..." He looked at Babs. "... exciting."

Otto waved this off and took another helping of potatoes. "Indeed ... how dare they try and marry his bride off to someone else. I loved the way Scott handled that piece."

"Tyson," cut in Corry, changing the subject, "has been training his beagles, you know. When Sir Frederick and I took a stroll this morning along the beach, we came upon him. They seem to be coming along nicely."

"Bah!" the count declared. "Beagles. What are they next to the fox-hunting hounds? What could compare to fox hunting?"

"Stag hunting," answered Sir Edward.

"Dreadful ... stag hunting," Babs snapped. "They run a straight line and therefore don't stand a chance ..."

"Absurd child, what makes fox hunting acceptable?" Sir Edward returned.

"Fox are cunning. They know how to lead the hounds a merry chase, and they go after the farmers' chickens. They kill all of the chickens without eating them ... just for fun. Fox hunters help the farmers, you see, keep things ... *even*."

Otto nodded his head vigorously. "Answer that, Ned!"

"Enough bickering," said Lady Jane. "This is not fit conversation for the table. Kill and destroy! Faith." She shook her head. "I have heard that the Stael is due to arrive shortly. Is it true, do you think?"

Babs smiled to herself. Her aunt was savvy and dear and something else—she was suspicious. Corry was correct: she was a knowing one. Perhaps, just perhaps she could help her out of this awful muddle?

Her mind went back to the note she had received in the late afternoon from the duke. She had read and reread it so many times, she knew it by heart.

Dearest Babs,

Sir Charles drags me to London though it is my inclination to remain

here with you just now.

My love, trust me and don't do anything foolish. Only wait for my return to set things right ... for I shall. Trust me.

Nick

She found she did trust him, without any doubt whatsoever, but what did he mean, 'don't do anything foolish'? Did he know ...? He couldn't know why she had accepted Sir Edward's suit—could he?

Even if he knew, there was nothing he could do. She was the only one who could see herself out of this muddle. She had nearly made up her mind that she would take her sad story to the Prince ...

Her thoughts had taken her away as dinner ended and everyone rose from the table. The men were on their way to the library. She found Corry's hand, but just as Corry led her away to the sitting room with the ladies, Sir Edwards stalled her with a touch.

She jerked away from him.

He eyed her angrily. "I am not some kind of monster ..." he said on a low note meant only for her.

Corry heard him and snapped, "Yes, you are."

His brows shot up, evidently surprised that his intended had confided all to her cousin. He inclined his head, smirked, and left them to each other while he cooled his heels with the gentlemen in the other chamber.

"You will not marry him," Corry said.

"No ..." agreed Lady Jane, coming out of nowhere and making both girls spin around to stare. "I quite agree. You shan't marry him. When you are ready, come to me, darling girl, and tell me what awful thing you have done that he knows about and is using against you. We shall see what we will do with that together."

Lady Jane did not wait for a reply but rushed off, lightly jesting with one of the ladies as she went. Babs turned to Corry to say on a hushed note, "This is all a nightmare ..."

"We shall do, only confess it all to our aunt ..." Corry encouraged.

"Why? What can she do?"

"I don't know, but I do know Aunt Jane," said Corry, staunch on this point.

"Well, I have a little time yet before he will want to make the announcement. It was our deal, and perhaps ... perhaps something will suggest itself to me soon ..." Babs said, thinking that she had no other choice but to visit with the Prince, and this she would have to plan out in secret.

Sir Edward was steeped in obsession. He knew it and couldn't stop himself. Winning had become everything, and the only way he would win was to have Babs as his wife. He couldn't see beyond that, didn't wish to see beyond that.

He became absorbed with the machinations to achieve his objective. He had experienced only a moment when he paused as he saw himself in the long glass and wondered what he was doing. He could not admit to any real tenderness of feeling for Babs, and yet, he wanted her, believed what he did feel was love. He shrugged his doubts off.

He had gone too far down the road and meant to see it to its end. No turning around—no backtracking for him.

He traveled the short distance to Hove and obtained a special marriage license. Babs was of age, and he had anticipated no problem when he listed her name. This done, he had found himself, in the same town, a minister of nondescript ethics and prepaid the man for his services. He then went to the circulating library and took up a book on potions and drugs, for a very real possibility suggested that Babs might have to be tranquilized throughout these planned proceedings.

That left only one last step to complete.

He had to get hold of Babs and have her away for some hours before their movements would be detected and perhaps tracked.

This would be most difficult and tricky, and he gave it some serious thought. He would have to eliminate Miss Bretton, who was in Babs' confidence. She was a serious threat to his plans, for she was no fool.

Right then, one must first dispose of Miss Bretton ...

A slow, wicked smile spread his lips as he lit on a plan.

~ Twenty-One ~

THE MORNING LOOKED gray with a threat of rain, as the early hour mist had not yet dissipated. Sir Frederick winced as he squeezed into his pale yellow waistcoat and then again when he pulled on his light blue superfine short-tailed coat. He turned to the long, gilt-edged mirror and frowned, not satisfied with the picture he presented.

He was not, however, going to go through the discomfort of changing ... though he wondered if Corry would like how he looked. No matter—he would allow her to take charge of his wardrobe when they were married. The thought of her as his wife made him grin like a fool and then sigh with sweet anticipation.

A knock sounded at his door, and a moment later his valet appeared with a silver tray extended to him. Sir Frederick eyed the ivory envelope with some puzzlement but took it and told his man to take in some leisure time for himself as he planned to go out soon.

He broke the seal and unfolded the note to read:

*Dearest Frederick,
Something dreadful has happened. We need you. Come at once to
the Lewes Inn, just outside of Lewes ... by noon. Do not fail us.
Corrine*

He reread this note and frowned again. He did not recognize the hand ... but then, he had not seen enough of Corry's pen to know it yet. She'd called him Frederick ... she rarely called him Frederick ... it was always, Freddy ... or sweet love ... or ...

Why the devil had they gone off to Lewes?

What was in Lewes? Something was havey-cavey about all this ... and yet, he could not do anything but go to Lewes and discover what the trouble was. It was all so odd, as he was supposed to have taken his beloved to meet his uncle for lunch. Now he would have to send a note round saying something unexpected had come up.

It felt off ...

And Lewes? Of all the outlandish places!

However, Sir Frederick lost no time in his preparations to leave. His beloved needed him. He wondered whatever for ...

At that particular moment, and just as Freddy was calling for his coach, now repaired and ready for use, his beloved Corry was opening an envelope marked 'confidential'.

She stared at it doubtfully for a moment before opening it to read:

Dearest Corrine,

As it happens, something is afoot in Lewes. You must meet me at once at the Lewes Inn, just before you reach the village on the village road, and tell no one where you are going.

I fear for your cousin in this matter. Hurry to me, my love, so that we may avert a scandal.

Your servant always,

Frederick

Corry stared at the wording.

She did not yet know Freddy's hand, but she fancied she knew Freddy's style, and this was far from it. And why so formal—'Your servant, Frederick'? *How odd.* Their intimacy had progressed past such things.

She had seen Babs leave just moments ago and had tried to make her wait so that she could join her, but Babs had said she needed to take a walk alone. Was that what she was doing? What was Babs up to?

It was this circumstance that worried her, coupled now with the note ...

There was nothing for it. Lewes was not so very far away; she would ride out immediately on horseback!

When Sir Edward had penned his notes, he had been wise enough to muse at length over the wording. He would have to say nothing, yet enough to make each recipient do as he wished and leave straightaway without stopping to think.

He was most concerned about Miss Bretton.

She was a practical young woman who would not move impulsively. However, her concern for her cousin should drive her forward and into his web.

He would have Sir Frederick and Miss Bretton to the north, while Babs would rush off, as he had instructed, to meet him in the southwest. How perfectly satisfying.

His letter delivered to Lady Babs early that morning had informed her that he was willing to discuss a delay in their marriage plans if she would meet him and allow him to plead a case for his continued courtship. He knew Babs would do anything he asked to accomplish this. She wouldn't suspect anything nefarious, as she believed he was willing to wait and publish the

banns and marry her with all the world in attendance. He had told her often enough that was his fondest wish. Well, he would forgo that.

Damn, but he was ever so brilliant.

He would school the chit and teach her to please him. She was, after all, only a female, and in the end she would adhere to her husband's wishes.

He took up his riding gloves, his top hat, and his crop and made his way across the room. He had hired a coach for this expedition, as he did not want Babs seen climbing into his carriage. *That wouldn't do.* He needed to get away cleanly and have a few hours lead before anyone was the wiser.

He didn't want his coat of arms noticed, and hence the hired coach. He didn't need any eyebrows raised, and he didn't want any undue attention until he was well away from Brighton. Things were coming together nicely, very nicely indeed!

The duke looked at Sir Charles and grinned. "Well, and when I tell you next time that you and the Home Office are out, perhaps you will believe me."

"Don't be so smug! We couldn't very well ignore a viable threat on Prinny's life, now could we?"

"Of course not, but then, it did not really require 'all the kings' horses and all the kings' men', in attendance. It was a simply a hoax," the duke said with a sigh.

"Under ordinary circumstances, you would not have been put into such a pet over this business."

"No? Then perhaps you will admit that these are not ordinary circumstances."

"Are they not?" Charles gave him a curious glance. "Why not? Your inclination to espionage and intrigue has always made you jump at the chance to solve—"

"This was not espionage," snapped the duke.

"Why are you so irritated?" Sir Charles asked bluntly.

"Babs—I have left her in the lurch. She is in some sort of trouble ... and I should have been there to see her though it."

"Tell me, Nick, what do you mean by her?" Sir Charles asked gravely.

"What do I mean by her? I mean to lay my heart at her feet and hope fervently that she doesn't stomp on it." The duke laughed without mirth.

"Then you mean to propose ...?" Sir Charles was astounded.

"I mean to find out what this secret engagement is to Ned ... Don't really like the fellow, but I can't imagine how he can have induced her to accept his suit unless she was willing, and I have to wonder if I am mistaken in her."

"Fool, she is without guile—though she is very naughty and unconventional. She doesn't like Ned ... and I have to think she is somehow being forced into this."

"Well then, we have but a few miles left to us. Let's make haste so that I

can get to the bottom of this mess.”

~ Twenty-Two ~

LADY BABS HURRIED down the avenue to the designated corner where she was supposed to meet Sir Edward. She had a bad feeling about this. Why this sudden change of heart?

A large, old-fashioned, and cumbersome coach came to a slow and then a full stop quite near where she was standing. She pulled her light blue velvet cloak tightly around her and adjusted her bonnet as she considered the vehicle.

A warning light was blinking in her head. A skittish sensation was tickling her spine. Something was not right. However, Sir Edward opened the door and waved for her to join him.

“What happened to your coach ...?” she called as she approached.

“Something wrong with the spring ... and it looks like rain, didn’t want to take out my open curricule.”

Babs hesitated. A sixth sense curled around her stomach and yanked at her brain. *Don’t go with him*, it told her. *Run, Babs, run!* a voice in her head demanded. *Run, run now ... run!*

“I think, Sir Edward ... you should meet me back at Waverly where we can talk ... I don’t think I feel well enough for a ride today,” she said, starting to back away.

“No, I think we need privacy for this ...” he said, getting out of the coach. He took a minute to pull the hood of his dark cloak well over his head and then reached out with a cloth and covered her face. He held her as she struggled and then went limp into his arms, and he smiled as he carried her and deposited her in his coach.

In all the excitement, he didn’t see Otto just climbing up and over the dune some distance away. He didn’t see Otto go stock still for only a moment. He didn’t hear Otto call out above the ocean waves and wind, “Stop, fiend! Stop ...”

He ordered his coachman forward, and forward they went with Otto chasing on foot.

Otto continued to shout and chase until he could run no more. He bent over his knees in order to catch his breath.

Inside the coach, Babs had fallen into a black canyon. She knew as she fell deeper and deeper that she was in serious trouble, and all she could see was a pair of bright blue eyes. “Nick ...” she said out loud to the chagrin of

her captor.

And then blackness enveloped her.

Miss Bretton had not reacted quite as Sir Edward had expected. He had thought she would go to the stables, take out the Waverly carriage, and use their driver, who would take much longer than a lady on horseback.

And that was what she was, a lady on horseback, taking shortcuts through the fields on her way to Lewes. She was used to rugged terrain and had often learned how to use the lay of the land to her advantage. Having lived in the States, she was accustomed to land far more rugged than the sedate and established roads of England.

It was therefore only a quick and easy ride to the Lewes. She hopped down from her sidesaddle, brushing the dust off her spencer and sticking her crop into her tall riding boot while she looked around.

The inn seemed respectable enough. It was an old, Tudor-styled building with an oversized barn that looked even larger than the main building.

Several chickens clucked and scattered as she walked by, and a fat white goat eyed her with suspicion as she spoke sweetly to it. "Nice goat ..." she said as she led her horse towards the groom coming out of the barn.

"Sorry, mum, didn't hear ye ... was out back oi was."

"No bother, just walk him for a bit before you water and stall him ... and do give him a flake of hay as well." She dove into her pocket and paid the boy, adding a generous gratuity for himself as well.

"Oi'll do 'im up proper, oi will," the lad said, grinning as he pocketed his share and put the rest in a can at the side of the barn.

This left Miss Bretton facing the main entrance of the inn. She took a long breath of air and marched towards the front door. She saw no sign of Babs and no sign of her Freddy, and she was beginning to tremble with trepidation.

"Well, now," she mumbled to herself. "You should have known better ..."

Freddy saw the inn as they passed the driveway to it and called to his driver to circle back to it.

Something nagged at him.

The inn was perfectly respectable in appearance, and so he told himself he was just being fanciful and all would be explained as soon as he found his dear Corry.

A moment later he managed the business of climbing out of the carriage with only a slight wince of pain as he jostled his set arm still hanging in a sling.

It was just inside the front door that he found Miss Bretton questioning the innkeeper. She heard Freddy's approach and turned to say, "Thank goodness, Freddy ... you are here." And so saying she flung herself into his arm, realized she was pressed up against his sling, and then stood back to say, "Oh ... did I hurt you? I am so very—"

"Nonsense. Hurt me indeed. It would have hurt me if you hadn't thrown yourself into m'arms. Its where you belong." He grinned at her, but then he got right to the point. "Corry, why did you want to meet here?"

She looked at him with dawning horror. "I did not ... but I received this from you ..." She fished into her deep pocket, produced the note, and handed it to him.

He surveyed it quickly and shook his head. "What devilry is this? I did not pen this ..." He looked at her. "And you did not send me a note requesting me to meet you and Babs here?"

"No ... I did not, and Freddy ... I fear the worst. I think Babs may have received some sort of note as well ... and may now be ... in danger ..." This last she said with a fist to her mouth and a sob caught in her throat.

"Well then, come on ... where is your carriage? You come along with me, and—"

"I came by horse. Quicker ..."

"Egad, woman, you are everything a man could hope for!" He beamed proudly. "Right, then, we'll tether it at the back of my coach ... and you come along with me. Looks like it will rain any moment ..." With that he led her unceremoniously out of the inn beneath the innkeeper's astounded gaze.

Freddy grimaced to hear the innkeeper at his back remark to his wife, "Flash gentry, never know what faradiddle they will be up to."

The duke, with Sir Charles beside him, rode hard towards Brighton. He had a nagging gut feeling that things were in a turmoil.

After some time his horse tired; Nick pulled him to a trot, relieved to see the outskirts of Brighton ahead.

They took a shortcut through the back of the village and parted at the duke's lodgings, where Charles left to attend to his own affairs.

Nick was poised to take the steps at a run when he heard his name called and turned to see the count running down the avenue and waving at him like a lunatic.

"Ho there ... Nick ... Nick, I say ... Nick ..." cried the Count, in a state of hysteria.

"What is it Otto? I am a bit rushed ..."

"Babs ... he took Babs ... I've been making tracks to get my horse ..." Otto was out of breath and obviously beside himself.

"Took Babs ... who took Babs?" Fear gripped the duke's heart and wrung it unmercifully.

“That devil friend of yours, Sir Edward—”

“He is no friend of mine, and he will be a dead man before this day is done,” the duke said, gritting his teeth. “Did you see which road he took?”

“I did.” Otto nodded. “I called after him, but he never noticed me. Believes he got away clean. He did something to her, by God, I saw him ... put something over her face ... she went limp ...”

“Which road did he take?”

“The beach road, south ... he went south ...” Otto said breathlessly.

Nick started taking the steps two by two, and Otto called after him, “Here ... where are you going? We have to go after her!”

“Get your horse, Otto, and follow as you can. I’m for my pistol, a fresh mount, and Edward’s head!”

“Tis something I’d like to see ...” returned Otto, taking off once more.

Sir Edward moved the window shade aside and gazed at the passing scene of sand and sea. The mist was turning into a fog. Pushing the window jacket open to let in the breeze, he sighed.

It was lowering to think he had come to such a pass.

Here he was, abducting a lady of quality, one of his own, and why? Because she didn’t want him.

What if she never forgave him for this day’s work?

He turned and looked at her. He had set her on a pillow, but even so, the bumping and lurching of the coach was going to give her a kink in her neck when she awoke. Just one more reason for her to think him the worst of men.

She slept like a child, unaware, but she would wake and know him for what he had become—a scoundrel.

“Lookee ... look sharp, Papa!” cried the young groom to his father.

Sir Edward frowned and looked out the window. “What ...?”

It was too late.

The driver had not seen the huge rut in the road in time, and Sir Edward was thrown back into the coach. He heard his driver howl with something close to terror just before the world around him tumbled and crashed.

The horses pelted out sounds of fear as the driving reins yanked them hard. In spite of their tethers, and for self-preservation, they jumped the wide ditch to avoid it. Although they cleared the gap, the carriage wheels landed directly in the long, wide gully.

The driver was flung forward, and the carriage tilted precariously to one side but miraculously only fell onto its side.

Inside, Babs groaned in her ether-induced sleep as she fell to the floor. Sir Edward was flung hard and hit his head against the wall in front of him. He was then thrown back against the squabs and lay dazed against them.

A moment later, Sir Edward shook off his lapse in consciousness and found Babs’ boots in his chest.

The driver was at the door, which was hanging open as the coach creaked and moaned. He had been dusting his wool cap off, but at the sight of Babs unconscious on the floor he threw his hands to his uncovered head and wailed, "Sir Edward! Oh no, the lady ... be she hurt?" And when Sir Edward regarded him foggily, he asked, "Sir Edward ... can ye 'ear me?"

Sir Edward was dazed still but lifted Babs' legs and set them aside as the driver kept repeating that they'd landed in a ditch. He wanted to swing at the fool and make him be quiet.

"The road must have washed out a bit with that storm we had last week ..." The driver scratched his head as his son tugged at his coat. "What, boy ... what ...?" He turned anxious eyes on his son.

"We best be getting them out ... before she goes over ..."

Sir Edward gently eased himself out of the coach. Then he turned, took Babs under her arms, and slowly eased her out. The driver jumped to help him, and together they carried her and laid her on a patch of grass alongside the road.

"A blanket for the lady," Sir Edward said, beginning to regain some of himself.

He had a nasty gash across his forehead, and blood dripped down his face. He brushed it away with the back of his hand and rubbed it off on the damp grass. The lad arrived with the blanket and laid it on the ground. Sir Edward and the driver lifted Babs again to place her on the blanket. Sir Edward wrapped her up in it, and then he sat beside her, his knees drawn up as he contemplated the problem before him.

Babs moved inside the blanket. Her eyelids fluttered, and she said softly, "Nick ...?"

With that she fell off again.

Sir Edward dropped his aching head into his hands.

~ Twenty-Three ~

THE DUKE HAD lost his hat somewhere along the way, and his black long hair blew around his face as he charged along the beach road on a horse better suited to his coach than his legs. However, the big horse had just enough steady speed to satisfy.

His thoughts tumbled over one another. Hove was the very next town. Why was Ned taking her to Hove? What was there? Damn the man's eyes, he would shoot him and then carve out his heart and ...

Damn, let him be on time; by all that was holy, let him be on time.

Thoughts of carving Sir Edward into pieces carried him until he was met with the sight of the lopsided coach in the ditch. "What the ..." he murmured, and then he sucked in a long dreg of air, for there was his love!

Babs lay still in a blanket on the ground.

Babs ... Babs was hurt?

"Hell and brimstone!" he shouted, for his heart was pounding out of his chest and his mind was reeling so quickly he couldn't see straight.

He was there, jumping off his horse and rushing towards Sir Edwards to tell him as he picked him up off the ground and shook him, "I shall have your heart out for you to examine as I cut it in pieces!"

Babs stirred, and her eyelids fluttered open. She took a long breath and tried to focus on her surroundings. What had she been doing?

Ah ... yes, Sir Edward had ... what had he done? Something horrid over her nose and mouth ...

She looked up and saw the love of her life knock Sir Edward to the ground. She smiled. If she was dreaming, this was the good part.

"Nick," she said softly and then louder, "Nick ... oh Nick ... you have come!"

He turned to her at the sound of her voice. He looked ragged with fury and concern, so she held up her hand to him. He took it and kissed it furiously as he dropped down beside her. "My love ... don't move, you are quite pale ... are you hurt?"

"Nick," seemed to be the only thing she could say.

"My love, my love ... oh my little love ..." The duke was beside himself as he held her gently in his arms.

"He drugged me, I think ... something over my face ..."

"I shall put him under ground for this!" The duke started to lay her back

down so he could make good on his words.

She held tightly to him. "My own Lord Wildfire ... I think ..." She glanced at Sir Edward unconscious on his back in the road. "You have already done that ... do you think now, you could get me home?"

"Yes ... first, my love, can you stand for me ...?" She started to move, and he helped her up onto her feet. "Are you ... steady?"

"Not quite ... but I shall do. If you hoist me onto your horse ... and hold me there with you, it won't be comfortable, but I think we can manage ..."

He almost crushed her to him. "My love, didn't you know ... couldn't you see, haven't I always told you that you could trust me?" He didn't wait for her response. "I will know why this happened ... why you agreed to allow this scoundrel ..."

"Ah, for now, kiss me, Wildfire ... then maybe I will tell you my big, dark secret," she said with some of her color returning to her cheeks.

~ *Epilogue* ~

AS IT HAPPENED, Babs convinced her Wildfire to leave Edward, who had lifted his head to survey the mess that was his, to the ministrations of his coachman.

"Before we go ... I mean to attend to him as he should be dealt with," the duke said harshly.

"No ... no ... you have to get me home ... leave him. We shall never look at him again." She pulled at his hand. "Come then, hoist me up ..."

He found himself unable to resist her. It was as though her wish was of the highest priority. He frowned but gently fixed her in the saddle and hopped easily up behind her. She said softly, "Hold me tight ... I am not quite steady."

He laughed with abounding joy. "You are a minx ... but say you will be my minx ... Babs, shall we be married this summer?"

"Oh yes, as quickly as we may before you change your mind," she said earnestly.

He laughed again and hugged her close. "Ah, my love ... I am set in my ways, but I know what I need for the rest of my life ... *Do you?* You are so young ... are you sure ...?"

"All I want for the rest of my life is your Wildfire kisses ... *You are the one, Nick,*" she said softly.

He laughed and hugged her as he asked, "Then why did you not say him nay?"

"I wrote *Passion's Seed*," she said simply. "He made it his business to find out who penned it, and then he threatened to expose me and ruin my family with the information."

"*You wrote ... you ...?*" His lordship was incredulous, and then he barked a laugh. "I am so very proud of you. Babs, you never cease to amaze me!"

"Then you don't mind?"

"Mind? Why should I mind ... When do you write the next?" He rubbed his chin on her head.

"But ... he may still choose to hurt me ..."

"He will be laid up for a time, and we are at an impasse. He cannot reveal his part in today's business, and for fear of having your name bandied about, nor can we, but as to the book, I have a notion that I think will work. I will visit with the Regent and confess that my future bride is the author. He will be thrilled to be the one who discovered the authorship, and he will make certain you are admired for it."

"It is what I thought I should do, go to the Regent, but I see it would be much better for you to do so."

"A powerful, wealthy duchess, which is what you will soon be, can be forgiven many idiosyncrasies," he said, touching the nape of her neck with a kiss.

"I have lost my bonnet ..." Babs suddenly realized with a sigh.

He laughed and sighed. “Babs, I think you are going to be forever giving me a neck-or-nothing ride ...”

“Otto said that what I need is a man who will smile at my antics ... perhaps curb me a bit ... but never tame me. You don’t wish to tame me—*do you?*”

“More’s the pity, I do not.” He kissed the top of her head, but as he brought her face up to his, he took his eyes off the road ahead, leaving it to his horse, and kissed her sweetly on her lips.

He came away with a husky note in his voice. “Have I told you that I love you beyond hope of recovery?”

She laughed. “What a very odd way to put it, but I am glad, for I don’t want you to recover from me ...”

And at that moment their attention was called away from each other by the sound of Otto yelling into the wind.

He rode at them, his hat and clothes askew, his manner full with excitement. Glancing at one another, Babs and her Wildfire felt a combined affection for the count as they laughed right out loud!

But six weeks later

The wedding went off beautifully with all the *ton* in attendance. Sir Charles was the duke’s best man. Miss Bretton was the maid of honor, and Babs asked Otto to be a groom in her wedding party, which he did with a great show of pride.

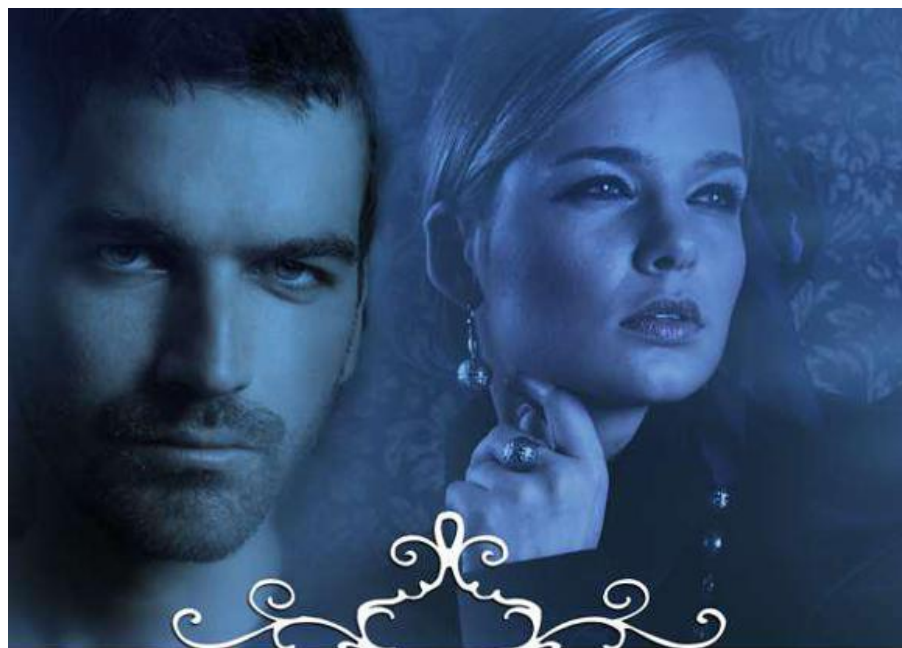
Sir Frederick and Miss Bretton were married only a month afterwards, as Corry wished to wait for the duke and his duchess to return from their honeymoon and stand up for them during the simple ceremony.

Sir Edward Danton decided to spend his summer at his country estate in the north and was not heard from until late in the fall.

Some whispered that he was recovering from a broken heart ... but perhaps that is a story for another day.

~ * ~

Taffeta and Hotspur



TAFFETA^{AND}
HOTSPUR



Taffeta and Hotspur

By

Claudy Conn

Copyright Page

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By Claudy Conn

<http://www.claudyconn.com>

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Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Page

~ One ~

~ Two ~

~ Three ~

~ Four ~

~ Five ~

~ Six ~

~ Seven ~

~ Eight ~

~ Nine ~

~ Ten ~

~ Eleven ~

~ Twelve ~

~ Thirteen ~

~ Epilogue ~

~ One ~

Spring 1813, Nottingham, England

TAFFETA LOOKED OUT the window as their well-sprung carriage rumbled languidly over the country road. It was a cool spring day, and the air held a fresh, crisp scent. She looked at her brother and uncle across from her. Although she could see they hadn't paid the least heed to the sweet breeze as it wafted through their open window, she breathed it in and prepared for battle.

"Don't pout, Taffy! It ain't like you, and it won't change my mind," snapped Lord Nigel in a tone obviously meant to be suitably firm and effective.

She wasn't pouting, but she couldn't pull herself out of her 'dream' to tell him. She was too deeply engrossed in the vision being enacted in her mind as though actors were on a stage right before her eyes.

She saw a huge, muscular, and beautifully naked man with dark eyes that burned through her as he looked right at her—at least the 'her' on the stage. His black hair fell in waves around his handsome face, and she watched herself as she glanced at him from top to bottom and allowed her gaze to linger on his ready manhood.

Lady Taffeta lived in the country and from time to time had witnessed a stallion breeding. This incredible man was much like a stallion. She felt herself blush and wondered who he could be—and why she wasn't shocked in her dream vision.

She had to get out of this vision. It was wrong—all wrong. She sucked in air and broke out of the dream as she pushed her golden tresses away from her face and tried to concentrate on the present. She didn't know where this vision had come from; she was sure she had never seen such a man—yet.

"What did you say? Pouting? I ... I am not pouting," she announced, doing a very good imitation of it.

Taffeta knew she had to direct her attention to the present. Sighing, she focused on the conversation at hand. "Nigel, why you are suddenly taking on this attitude is more than I can fathom. You may be my uncle, but you are only two years my senior and not fit to tell me what I should or should not be doing."

Nigel turned to her brother beside him. She knew he was looking for help. Her brother, the young Duke of Grantham, had been more friend and

confidant than nephew to Nigel since the first day they had gurgled together on the lawns of Grantham Castle, she'd frequently been told.

"What are you grinning about, Seth? I should think you would lend me your aid in this. After all, she is your sister!"

Taffy watched her brother as he eyed his uncle doubtfully.

"Don't look to me for help with the brat. Papa was the only one able to control Taffy, and this muddle is all your doing, you know."

Lady Taffeta eyed her brother ruefully and then her young uncle and guardian. She knew it had been difficult for him. Nigel had been born to his parents late in life. After his parents' death, his care and upbringing had gone to his older brother, and he had grown up with Seth and her. The job of guardianship, therefore, was forever in conflict with the position he held as their confidant and friend. Scarcely a month in age separated her brother and Nigel, but that month had been enough to award Nigel guardianship of both her brother and her upon the death of their beloved father. She didn't know what she would have done without both of them.

However, it was getting close to the day when Seth would be of age and take the reins of his own and her legal interests. *It is sad really*, she thought idly, *how little women are allowed*.

"You know, Seth, when we started this thing with the Luddites, well ... I allowed myself to be drawn into it, even allowed you to drag Taffy in," Nigel said.

This brought her out of her reverie, and she raised one brow as she eyed them. "I wasn't dragged."

"Very well, I allowed Taffy to join in the thing because she—we—needed a diversion. We were all so glum when we lost your father, but dash it, man, I didn't think it would go this far. It just isn't the thing for Taffy to be involved in," he said irritably. "All of this just now is wrong. In fact, it is time *for us* to withdraw as well."

"Taffy always gets into everything we do. Always has," Seth answered with a wide grin in her direction. "And we *are* withdrawing."

"Well, fond of her, we are both fond of her—spirited thing," Nigel conceded, talking about her as though she weren't there. "And, yes, thank goodness, we are withdrawing."

"You have always enjoyed having me with you before, Nigel," Taffy said with hurt in her voice.

"As to that, don't mind now—quite the opposite really. You have been helpful, in fact, but that isn't the point, is it?" Nigel answered impatiently.

"That's right. You're a great 'un, and I'm proud to own it!" answered Seth.

"Well, but you shouldn't, Seth. You are a duke. One day you will owe it to the line to take a wife and beget an heir. Your sister needs to marry to suit her station and have a life. You should not be referring to her as a *great gun*!"

"Bit out there, Nigel. Taffy has a life. Deuce take it, what maggot's got

into your head, with all this talk of marriage and heirs? None of us are ready for that.”

“That is just it—we should be getting ready for it. We all owe it to our names. Taffy may only be nineteen, but next month she will turn twenty, and she needs to attend the London cotillions and not have these escapades hanging over her head. They may rear up and haunt us.”

“Oh pooh, as though I care for such things,” she said.

“Well, you *should* care for such things,” replied her uncle. “The job of guardian wears heavy on my mind lately.”

“I am happy here at Grantham with you and Seth. I don’t want to troll about for a man in London.”

Her brother barked a laugh, and Nigel shook his head. “*Troll about*, indeed. Taffy, don’t you want to be courted?”

“Have enough of that right here in Nottingham,” she said with a giggle. “*Your* friends have been doing a bang-up job of courting me these last few months.”

“Really?” her brother was moved to exclaim. “Never say so, Taff—who?”

“Trevor Harley for one. He has been making up to me for the last three months. And Sir Edward tried to kiss me in the rose garden yesterday, and Jeffry *did* kiss me the day before ...”

“Edward tried to kiss you? *Jeffry did kiss you?* I’ll run them through.” After making this quite proper declaration, the young duke immediately burst into laughter. “‘Pon my soul, Edward and Jeffry?” He bent over with rollicking mirth and slapped Nigel, who was also chuckling, on the knee, and repeated, “Edward, and Jeffry!”

She waited patiently for some moments while they caught their breath again before returning to the issue at hand. “So, I am perfectly content to stay at Grantham and not bother with a London season.” She shook her head. “Don’t want to add my name to the lists of debutantes and stand in line waiting to be noticed.”

“You may be my sister, but I ain’t blind, girl.” Her brother let out another chuckle. “You wouldn’t be waiting in line—you would stand out. Have you looked at yourself lately?”

“Taffy, you are naught but a green girl,” her uncle Nigel pronounced.

“Take care, Nigel,” Taffy warned. She lowered her voice in annoyance and was satisfied to see they understood her well enough to know she was in a temper about to boil over.

“Oh, now, Taff, take a damper,” said her brother. “What Nigel means is that you will want a house of your own one day. You know Papa always said two women could not comfortably rule one household, and if one of those women were you—whoa.” He smiled at her and took her chin. “In order to make a suitable marriage, you are going to have to *out-strut* the best of them at Almack’s and choose the man of your dreams, not go wildly about with Nigel and me.”

"But I am a part of it all." It was half a plea, half a demand and delivered in an obstinate tone. "And I shan't allow you to shut me out at this stage. I want to see it through."

"We allowed you to join us to shake you out of your depression over Papa's death," her brother offered gently. "We—"

"Yes, but—" Taffy interrupted.

"But, nothing. As you were interested in the Luddite movement, we let you tag along on that first harebrained fetch we came up with—"

"Yes, but—" Taffy interrupted again.

"Stop it. We were wrong, Taffy. We didn't give a monkey for the consequences, but you must see now, it won't do." He shook his fair head. "You must see that now, and, Taff, Nigel is right. We must take you to London, and you *will* take your place amongst the *haute ton*."

"Tonight has nothing to do with tomorrow. London is something we will do if it will please you and Nigel, but tonight we will go through with our rig, just as planned," Taffy said with some determination as she folded her arms across her middle.

Their carriage had approached a long, winding drive cutting through neatly clipped, lush green lawns. Flowerbeds of daffodils were in riotous bloom. Tulips of rich shades gently swayed in the breeze, and with a sigh of resignation, Lord Nigel noted that they were fast approaching Lady Watson's front drive.

"So then, it is settled?" Taffeta pursued quickly. "We go as planned?" Her uncle and brother exchanged defeated glances. She knew they were honor-bound to proceed as they had promised. They had given their word, and she was sure they would never renege. She was also sure they relied on her very unique and secret abilities, which had been of service to them in the past. Taffy's 'gift of sight' had saved them already more than once.

They nodded at her, and her brother said, "Aye, then, this last time, vixen."

She smiled, pleased enough, and hoped these strange dream visions of the handsome stranger would stop and allow her to concentrate on the job at hand.

* * *

Hotspur! Lady Watson considered the amazingly tall and well-built Corinthian conversing amicably with her as he stood by the long window in her parlor. He was eight and twenty and still full of fire—the very devil of a man. Even the dandy cut of his light blue coat and buff-colored breeches couldn't disguise the athletic swell of his lean and sturdy form.

His black, windswept curls were neatly at variance with his rugged and thoroughly masculine countenance, and his smile, so rarely seen by most, was almost incongruous in contrast to his dark, stern eyes. Everything about him gave credence to the name the *haute ton* had given him.

Hotspur indeed—an appropriate name if ever there were one. An odd

thing, considering his youth. Oh, he had ever been the passionate lad, full with romantic high ideals. But she had watched those ideals wither unmercifully, and he had put an end to such beliefs, putting them away if not banishing them completely.

She could remember him at twenty—warrior-hearted, generous, shy, and so very much in love. That was then, however; now ... now he was *Hotspur!*

She patted the empty spot beside her on the richly upholstered Regency sofa of yellow damask. “Already itching to be off, Tarrant? Never say you are bored after only one morning in my company.”

He smiled warmly at her. “Aunt Lizzie, favorite of my aunts, dear to my heart, I must admit, *I am* feeling edgy.”

“Ah, too much vapid conversation, but I shall look to entertain you better ... shortly,” she replied, teasing him back.

He eyed her. “Oh? What are you up to?” And then, before she could answer, he sighed heavily and said, “I was thinking of taking Demon out for a run.” Raising his hands as she started to object, he laughed and admonished her, “It is only a ride, after all.” When she pulled a face, he said, “Wait a moment. You are up to something, aren’t you? What have you done? Something, I’d swear.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She avoided his eye.

He chuckled. “Well, I wasn’t sure before, *but now* I am. Come on then, Aunt Liz—what is towards?”

“I only meant you should just leave the stallion be. He is grazing happily in my stud paddock and is happy for the time off, I am sure.”

“Right, as though you give a fig about such things. What are you up to, Lizzie dearest?”

“Again, I repeat, I don’t know what you mean.” She busied herself with the folds of her skirt, sweeping away an imaginary wrinkle. Her aged hand then fluttered to the puff of white curls that ornamented her regal head. “Do come and sit with me, Tarrant. There is so much I want to discuss with you.”

However, at that moment the sound of the carriage wheels scraping against gravel drew his gaze to the window. She watched him stand rigidly observing the carriage as it came to a complete stop in the courtyard just within their view. A footman went forward to open the carriage door, and a dainty blue silk shoe emerged.

“Ah,” Lord Thurston Tarrant remarked as he turned and stared at her. His hands clasped behind his back, he leveled a disappointed look at her. “So then,” he said in a tone that displayed a level of hurt, “*Et tu, Brute?*”

Her lashes fluttered. “I don’t know what you can mean.”

He paced, and she could feel his tenseness, could see the irritation lingering in his eyes. This was the first time she had ever tried to throw a female in his way, and she knew he would be angry. She had not been able to help herself, and even as the sneer marred his good looks and destroyed the smile that had been there only a moment ago, she still felt she had done the

right thing.

“Do come and sit with me, and I shall explain later,” she offered.

Tarrant eyed her. “I thought myself safe with you, Lizzie. You have never played matchmaker before. You know that is why I come and visit you.”

She sighed. “’Tis not what I am doing now.” She was lying, and when he raised a brow at her, she realized he knew. “I simply thought, well, you shall see,” she said as she got up and joined him at the window.

They watched the newcomers just outside, and he grimaced at her. She smiled at him and said on a whisper, “She is such a wild young thing, and I thought she could use a friend in London, especially at the balls.”

“And you thought I ...?” He raised a brow at her again, and his surprise appeared genuine.

“She is a diamond, Tarrant, don’t you think?” She sighed heavily.

He wagged a finger at her. “Think you I have not had diamonds enough thrown at me?”

“Yes, but ...”

* * *

The Duke of Grantham, Lord Nigel of Rothbane, and the Lady Taffeta were announced, and the Hotspur stood back and apart to better observe their arrival.

The ‘diamond’ wore a simple blue redingote that covered an alluring female figure. She seemed to him to have an easy manner as she walked, and he watched her with casual interest as she unbuttoned her coat and allowed it to fall without ceremony onto a nearby chair. *Hmmm*, he wondered, *is she a frequent visitor here at Aunt Lizzie’s?*

Next went her matching blue bonnet, displaying bright yellow hair lit with copper, thick with a profusion of curls trailing over her ears and down her back. Her waist was tiny; for a moment he imagined his hands holding her waist, and he felt himself get hard.

He frowned as he made an attempt to stop it, but when he caught sight of her full breasts, nipples hard and probing the soft material of her gown, his hard-on began to pulse. *Hell and fire!*

This had to stop—she was a veritable schoolgirl. Then she turned fully to him with her aunt’s introductions, and he saw her face. *Hell and fire is right. She is stunning!*

Her gray eyes were bright with amusement, her nose pert, her lips full and rosy. He wanted to take her into his arms and drive his tongue into her mouth and ...

“I am very pleased to meet you.” His kept tone reserved.

She laughed. “Are you? You don’t look very pleased. In fact, you are wearing a scowl,” Taffy said, her merriment charming.

He chuckled in spite of himself. “Am I?” He gave her a false smile. He had to set her apart, to demonstrate he wasn’t interested. “Is that better?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” she said. “Try again when you mean it.” Taffy turned away from him to plop herself on the sofa with his aunt, seemingly uninterested in him.

“Tarrant surprised me with a visit when he arrived yesterday. I was just about to tell him you, Seth, and Nigel were coming for luncheon today when you arrived.”

“Oh, is that why he is all dark and gloomy?” Taffy teased. “Thought he would have you all to himself? Well, we won’t intrude too long.” She smiled up at Tarrant with mischief in her eyes.

He was again taken by surprise—she was refreshingly direct, quite a pleasant change, really, from the simpering misses he often encountered. Scowling at the direction of his thoughts, he turned away from her to enter into conversation with the two young gentlemen who were in a lively discussion at his back.

His attempt to ignore her was thwarted when Taffy entered their discussion about politics, and before long he found he was actually enjoying himself. Their ideas were innovative—youthful and naïve at times, but definitely intriguing. He had never met a woman interested in such matters before. His aunt appeared totally at sea and got to her feet, telling them she would see about getting things ready in the dining room.

Taffy rose and stood with them, wagging her finger at her brother with good humor, laughing, making references to the *Chronicle*, quoting members of Parliament, and fascinating him.

He was taken aback by her, sure he should not be conversing with such a young chit in such a fashion, and yet ...

Her style had caught his interest, and the next thing he knew, he was watching the way she moved. Her walk was a series of bounces—so full of life—and her body looked so damned provocative. Something in her every step displayed that she was happy to be alive, and yet, she was graceful and feminine. She was new, shiny and bright; however, he knew better than to fall victim to such charms. His life experiences had taught him to be wary. Yet she seemed to glide in a whirlwind of unconscious high spirits and had displayed sweet affection when his aunt had remarked on something amusing. She hugged his aunt affectionately and placed a kiss upon her white cheek upon her return, and he could not deny the sincerity in the chit.

“Don’t squeeze me so, child,” cried Lady Watson with a laugh. “I’m too old and will, in all likelihood, crack.” She took Taffy’s hand. “Now, in with you. Time to eat.”

“Is it true they call you the Hotspur?” Seth asked as they walked toward the dining room.

His uncle exclaimed in a shocked accent, “Seth!”

“What?” Seth took to blushing.

Tarrant laughed out loud and bowed his head. “The same, sir,” he said as he noted from the corner of his eye Lady Taffeta was studying him rather

openly. It was not a surprising circumstance. He had achieved over the years an education in the arts of the female. He had been subjected to maids of many admirable qualities and had suffered more than he cared to remember from their missish airs and coy flirtations. He knew he was a marriage prize. He knew, but it had not always been so. It had not been true when his oldest brother had still been alive with both the title and most of the fortune. He had only been the second son and had been in love with a beautiful woman, but she had wanted more—more than the second son.

He understood the game, and he loathed its intricacies and its inherent dishonesty.

After they took their seats in the dining room, Taffeta said to him across the table, “That black of yours, the stud we saw when we came up the drive, is magnificent. I don’t think he was here when we were last.” She then turned to his aunt. “Was he, Lizzie dear?”

“Absurd child, what would I do with such a beast? His name is Demon, and he belongs to Tarrant here,” Lady Watson answered. “His lordship is considered quite a horseman, and we believe Demon will let no other on his back.”

“A Corinthian is what his lordship is,” Taffy’s brother stuck in and then receded into a deprecatory cough. “Or so I have heard ...”

Taffy turned her bright gray, interested gaze back to Lord Tarrant. “So then, are you saying Demon is the very devil to handle, my lord?” Her eyes twinkled at him, and once again he was mesmerized by her.

“That he is—in fact it’s how he got his name.” He discovered that against his will she had drawn a smile from him. He had meant to ignore her to the point of rudeness.

Lady Watson’s pug at this point managed to push open the dining room door, which had not been totally closed. He stopped at the threshold, surveying the assembled group, and with a screeching series of barks, ran over, and jumped into Lady Taffeta’s lap as she turned in her seat to coo to him.

She petted the dog with a laugh, saying, “Do stop it, you vicious, adorable little thing. There now, go sit by Lizzie. There is a good boy.”

* * *

With this, Taffy returned her attention to her companions and discovered Nigel and her brother had engaged Tarrant in conversation, so she used the time to better peruse him.

He was the man from her dream. She had seen this at once, and how she had controlled the fit of coughing she’d nearly succumbed to was more than she presently knew.

At first she thought she must be wrong, but when she looked at him fully, she knew he was the man—only he had been naked in her vision. This was wrong—all wrong.

He was devastatingly handsome, more handsome than any man she had ever seen. Here, however, unlike in her dream, he appeared cold-hearted and arrogant. *Yes, insufferably arrogant.*

His manners, though polite, had been decidedly aloof. She decided he was probably no better than any London Corinthian puffed up with his own consequence. He could not be the man in her vision. She knew she could never be romantic with such a man—and it was clear he certainly was not interested in her.

She shrugged him off in her mind and returned her attention to Lady Watson, who smiled and asked, “And so, my child, you will be leaving for London and dear Sissy’s soon? Are you very excited?”

“No. Dreading it, in fact,” Taffy said on a heavy sigh. “It is bound to be dull work.”

Lord Tarrant regarded her, and she was, for a moment, caught up in his gaze.

“London—*dull work*?” he quizzed.

She wasn’t sure if she liked his tone or the manner in which he lifted his dark brow, as though he didn’t believe her. “Yes, dull work, when one considers what it is all about—at least to a female.”

“How do you mean?”

“Sissy will insist I put up my hair all the time and no doubt outfit me in the most fashionable gowns and make me hold my tongue and ride sedately and all manner of horrible things, and why? Because I must be paraded and then sold to the highest bidder! Outrageous. The entire thing a bore.”

“Perhaps.” He grinned. “But I rather think all those things will bring you some measure of entertainment.”

“No, it won’t. The *haute ton* my aunt so desperately intends for me to enter sounds a dim-witted lot only interested in the cut of their clothes and the latest *on-dit*.”

He laughed, and she heard the genuine amusement in his laugh. “You may be pleasantly surprised.”

She considered this with a wrinkle of her nose. “Do you think so? This is what Nigel and Seth keep saying, so perhaps you are right.”

“Moppet,” Lady Watson said with a shake of her head. “As though you have anything exciting happening here in Nottingham.”

“But we do. What of the Luddites?” Taffy bit her tongue. She couldn’t possibly tell Lady Watson what was so exciting about the Luddite movement.

“Luddites, eh?” said Tarrant. “We had something of a riot last week in the Riding Country. It is a terrible business, and at present I don’t see a solution.”

“The solution is to pay these people a fair wage. It is the only solution,” Taffy said with feeling. “Shouldn’t England’s peers work in Parliament to do just that?”

“Indeed, Taffy is quite right, you know. It is Parliament’s duty,” Nigel said.

“The only talk I have heard in Parliament about the Luddites is a heated desire to put them to trial,” Tarrant said with a shake of his head.

“Monstrous!” Taffy cried.

She found Tarrant looking into her eyes and was caught off guard a moment, but only for a fraction of a moment, when he said, “You must feel strongly. Your eyes are alive with gold-lit flames.”

Was he actually flirting with her? She blasted such a thought away. No, he was not; he looked at her like she was nothing more than an ignorant schoolgirl. Even though she was seated, she still managed to put her hands on her hips. “Of course I feel strongly. We should all of us feel strongly. Such things should not be allowed to go on.”

“However, they are too often a part of life,” he answered quietly. “You are young and a bit naïve still, and as I have no wish to shoot down your ideals, I shall leave it at that.”

“Well, I am not naïve,” her brother interjected with some vigor. “And my sister is quite correct. We can not allow such things to stand.”

“Indeed,” added Taffy with strenuousness. “Men in your position should work to prevent injustices.” She shook her head and saw he was staring at her again. Was she getting through to him? Did he agree with their point of view? Would he help them in Parliament? “Are you aware, my lord, these people’s working conditions at the mill are not bearable? Are you aware of the pitiful wages, of the dangers from the machinery, or the hours they are forced to work?”

Her brother was clearly drawn in by her passion. “Indeed, Tarrant, they are worked harder than slave labor. They are starving, so they accept anything they can get, and their employers take advantage of that.”

“Yes, I quite agree with you, their situation is dire, but what they need to do is make active *verbal* protest. I can’t condone their riots—the smashing of machinery, their attacks of violence on innocent people. Good lord, lad, I have even heard of a group of Luddites here in Nottingham who meets in Sherwood Forest. It is said they have taken to robbing the rich on the highway in the name of Robin Hood with the excuse they are giving to the poor.”

“And why was Robin Hood admired as a hero for his efforts, and these people scorned?” she asked heatedly.

“Robin Hood is a legend.” His voice was grim as he continued, “The Luddites are a fact of life, and another fact is they will be crushed if they continue in their present course.”

Taffy was frustrated, because what he was pointing out was sadly true. However, she was also frustrated by men who would point out the problems with a just rebellion and not offer a just solution. Too, there was something dismissive when he spoke to her, and so she put up a cold shoulder. Men very often thought that women should not involve themselves in politics, and she was heartily sick of that sort of attitude. No doubt he was one of those men. He spoke gently to her, but was he patronizing her? Was he allowing her to

think he understood while trying only to quiet her? She could not yet tell just what he thought.

“Well, as a peer of the realm, I for one, plan to do something about it when I get to London,” Seth declared with feeling.

“Aye,” Nigel agreed. “We’ll take them on, won’t we, Seth?”

Soup plates were placed in front of them, and Lady Watson, with a pleasant smile, said, “Now, enough talk of politics. Cook has prepared a wonderful potato and leek soup, and we must not allow it to get cold ...”

~ Two ~

IT WAS LATE afternoon, and Lady Taffy was sparring for wind. Thurston Tarrant, the rakehell Hotspur, was the man in her visions—no doubt about it whatsoever.

This is, of course, impossible, she told herself. Her dream vision had to be off somehow—could it be off? Now and then she managed to change a vision; not often, but it did change. Oh, this was all wrong.

She had come home in a great irritation of nerves, changed into her green riding habit, plopped a matching top hat on her head, grimaced at her reflection, and thrown it off. How could she have been dreaming about such a cad of a man? He was a rogue of rogues. He was a heartbreaker. Why had she seen him naked—why had she been naked? What a stupid question. She set this aside. It had to have been some strange quirk of the mind. She just wasn't getting the entire story from the small snippet of a premonition—that was it. It had to be.

What she needed was a good run to dissipate her confusion and put her back in order. But the thing was, she was in a state of agitation because never before had she met such a man as Thurston Tarrant.

Her brother had said he had the reputation of being the very devil with the ladies. *Oh yes*, the rakehell Hotspur could certainly have no place in her life. What she wanted when she fell in love was not a rakehell but a man who would love only her—faithfully. This one, this Hotspur, would be faithful to no one woman.

Her brother had said there wasn't a woman who didn't want him, *eh?* Well, she could see Tarrant thoroughly believed in his own myth. *Hotspur, indeed!* And then her mind's eye recalled his perfect naked body reaching for her in her dream. She recalled how she felt in her vision, hot and ready and willing. It brought on a wave of heat in the present, and her blood surged through her body. This had to stop. The vision was a mistake ... an error ... a false dream that meant nothing.

He was arrogant, rude, and puffed up in his own consequence, and he had been impudent enough to think *she* was interested in him. Well, at least she had managed quite neatly to put any such notions he might have had on that score deeply into the earth.

She had exchanged dagger for dagger, hit for hit, during lunch and then again just as she quit his company. But the truth was it had been frustrating

when he'd pointed out the hopelessness of the Luddite situation without addressing any possible solutions. It had felt like a fruitless discussion that had gone nowhere.

Lady Taffeta had been cosseted and adored all her life. What little she could remember of her mother had been dear and loving. Her father had been openly devoted to her. Seth and Nigel were wont to tease her, but never had they, or any of their friends, treated her with such disdain. More than that, their friends had recently been quite gallant and flirtatious, a circumstance she had been learning to appreciate.

This Hotspur had the audacity to think she had set her cap for him, so she had spent the entire luncheon trying to convince him of the reverse—*vision be damned!* The effort had left her breathless with chagrin. These agitating thoughts had taken her stomping toward the stables, where she tacked up her chestnut gelding without benefit of her groom's help.

She led her favorite riding horse outside and mounted him with ease. Her loose hair blew freely about her face as the wind picked up. She walked her gelding onto the bridle path and then put him into an easy trot, telling him all the while she was very happy he was in a chipper mood, for she was not.

His ears pricked to her voice as he listened, and she reached over and patted his neck affectionately. "There, never mind me."

She wanted to keep to the fields and wooded trails; in order to accomplish this, she was forced to skirt the pasturelands that divided Watson Halls from Grantham.

The gate was closed, and with a silent oath, she set her pace as she got into position, placing her heels well down and her body neatly poised. Her gelding's ears flickered alertly as he looked ahead at the jump.

"I know, Red Moose. You don't like the high jumps, and truth is, I don't much either, but the gate is closed, and I don't feel much like getting down and up. Let's just take it. Right then—here we go."

She knew her horse loved her, and he told her so then with a soft sound, something between a snort and a whinny. "I love you, too, Moose," she said with a laugh. "Come on—pick up the pace, and we'll do fine. Just think of it as only a few feet higher than a log. Honestly, you could step over it." Her tone was confident, encouraging the gelding. "Nothing to worry about, Moosey."

She legged him on, and he obediently went for the jump. At the very last moment, however, he changed his mind and made as though to duck out and refuse. Taffy screamed irritably, "No, sir, no! You know better."

She went into position and drove him, but his sharp movements shifted her position in the saddle and sent her off balance. Her gelding did finally accede to her demand and took the gate flying, landing heavily on the other side, which sent her sideways in her saddle when he planted his fores on the ground.

She nearly lost her seat completely, and with no dignity whatsoever, she

scrambled, grabbed his neck and mane, and managed to right herself. As she settled back into her saddle, she scolded him. “Odious brute, you almost lost me there.” Taffy, however, was so relieved she was still in the saddle she released a nervous laugh and added ruefully, “You certainly are well named, Moose.”

“*Damn* if you didn’t make him do it. Didn’t think he would for a moment there ...” She heard the chuckle of a male rider making his way alongside of her. “I thought for a moment I might be picking you up off the ground. Well done, Lady Taffeta.”

She was nearly surprised enough to lose her seat again, and she blew out a whiff of air when she spun around and discovered, of all people, the rakehell Hotspur seated on his horse, grinning broadly.

She knew what she must look like—a complete mess. As she started to speak, she discovered she was hindered by a long tress between her teeth. She removed her hair from her mouth, but the wind would not cooperate and blew it right back. Oh, why hadn’t she at least pinned it back? However, she managed to draw herself up and regain her composure. She eyed him coldly and thought, *Of all people to witness a clumsy jump—it had to be him. Grrr.* She could have cried right then, but instead she said with an edge of haughtiness, “My lord. I thank you, but I must admit it to have been my fault. I should have stopped Moose and brought him back in for a better line to the gate.”

“Agreed, but nevertheless, you made him take it, which he did like a rocket, *and you* managed to stay put when he landed badly.”

His grin made her want to throw mud at his face.

She grimaced. “He doesn’t like jumping; I don’t know why I made him ...” She patted the horse’s neck and managed an amiable laugh. “Poor Moose—the big jumps frighten him.” She sighed. It was over and done. He had seen her at her worst. So be it. Brush herself off and move on. “What brings you out? I had thought you would be packed and off for London by now.”

Tarrant’s black stallion pranced beneath him, and he took a moment to bring his horse under him. She could not help but admire his horsemanship. He was strong of leg and quiet of hand.

The two horses touched noses, and the stallion seemed pleased to find Moose submissive so they fell easily into step beside each other, leaving Tarrant free once more to converse.

He eyed her and said, “As to that, it was my intention, but my aunt wishes me to stay for dinner, and I have dutifully accepted. She is the favorite of my aunts, and I don’t see enough of her.” The stallion snorted for an unknown reason and pranced a bit until he quieted him again.

Taffy laughed appreciatively as she indicated with a flick of her chin. “He suits you—restless.”

His eyes stared into hers, and once again he was the man in her vision.

Feral with desire ... coming for her, and she was oh, so willing. She had to stop this. She couldn't think of him like this. Maids were not supposed to—

Tarrant jarred these thoughts when he laughed and said, "Let's call a truce, you and I, shall we?"

"A truce, my lord? Were we at war?"

He smiled, and she was all too aware of his magnetism. This one was dangerous. He had a killer smile and a singular charm to go with it. When he used them, a woman could forget he was a scoundrel.

He inclined his head. "I don't know why it was, but I think lunch was a sparring contest."

She eyed him warily. The devil was actually flirting with her. *Does he think I would be an easy conquest? Ha!* "A truce, then. I shall not throw my handkerchief, or cap, your way, *and you won't* try to seduce me." She watched the devil glitter in his eyes, and it was most definitely intriguing. She had to keep him at arm's length for certain.

He laughed again and answered easily, his eyes full with his amusement, "I shall have to consider this ..." Without warning, he leaned over and lightly, easily managed to kiss her lips, parting them, and expertly found refuge there for his tongue.

She was startled by the unexpectedness of it. She was shocked by her reaction both in her body and her mind. The blood raced through her veins, calling all her nerve endings into action. Her heart began to purr with anticipation. A spot between her thighs tickled her with heat and an itch to be touched.

His kiss was everything she had expected the rakehell Hotspur's kiss to be. More, she realized, it was what she wanted it to be.

She went to battle with herself and somehow found the ability to pull away abruptly. She put up her chin. "Am I to assume, then, we have not negotiated a truce?"

His laughter resonated on the breeze, and she found herself smiling in spite of the frown she tried to maintain. He said, "Must it be one or the other?"

"One or the other," she answered firmly.

"Then I think not," he said brightly. "War it is, my lady, and to the victor go the spoils."

She made a show of sighing heavily. "Well, you still needn't worry I shall aim my cap your way. You are not at all the sort of man *I* am after."

His pique set his jaw, and she had an urge to giggle but managed to control herself.

"Oh, really? What sort of man *are* you after?"

She beamed mischievously. "What every girl wants, of course. A knight of the realm, a hero, a man of principles and romance—a man who will always take her side."

"He doesn't exist," Tarrant retorted harshly.

She looked at him sideways. "Then I am destined to be a spinster." With this, she clicked her horse and took off into a heady canter.

He caught up to her in a moment, for she could see his black did not mean to be left behind. They collected their horses and moved along side by side. They slowed as the field ebbed and the wooded path opened before them.

Taffy brought her horse to a stop and allowed him to graze on some nearby tall grass. "Oh, that was lovely," she said breathlessly. "What a fine animal you have, my lord. But never say you ride him tamely in Hyde Park."

"I've schooled Demon myself. He will go as sedately or as wildly as I ask of him."

Again, she saw the arrogance, the self-confidence, the high opinion he seemed to have of himself. She bristled. "Of course—how foolish of me to doubt you," she said in mock meekness.

He looked at her sharply, but said nothing for a moment, and when he did speak a tinge of criticism lined his words. "Tell me why it is that both your uncle, young though he is, and your brother allow you to go off alone like this—without even a groom in attendance?"

She took umbrage. "I suppose that is my business and theirs."

He laughed. "It certainly would have been theirs had you fallen back there and been injured, fledgling."

"Well, they are off to a cockfight, and I am quite used to riding about unattended."

He smiled, and a tease twinkled in his eyes and lit in his voice as he admonished her casually, "In addition to the fact you could take a tumble, riding freely as you do, it is not at all the thing for a lady to ride astride and without the protection of at least her groom."

She put up her chin. "I am well enough known in our village and surrounding area. Who would accost me?" She shrugged this off. "And as to riding astride, I prefer it. Riding in a lady's saddle is not always an easy or comfortable task. Why we should have to do so is outrageous. Taking a tumble? If I were missing, someone would come looking."

He raised a brow quizzically. "As to who would accost you—any man with eyes in his head, sunbeam."

"But any man with a brain in his head wouldn't dare. There are consequences they would have to incur, and I am no easy prey."

He inclined his head, and she could see he had decided to change the subject. "Ah," he said, looking into the distance, "Grantham looks quite lovely from this hill."

She eyed her home and smiled. "Yes, yes, it does."

"And with it in sight, I am afraid I must leave you, sunbeam, as I am headed for the village." He tipped his beaver hat. "Perhaps I may see you in London."

"Perhaps." She noted black waves of hair fell across his forehead most fetchingly. She immediately banished the notion. He was a hell-bent rake. He

was the Hotspur, and she was not going to be just another one of his conquests.

She watched as he left her and made for the village road only a short distance off. He turned to wave at her, and she felt a moment's gratification, which she immediately chastised herself for feeling. In all probability, she would not see him again, and his kiss had been a kiss goodbye. Still, it was a kiss she would remember forever, for she was fairly certain she would never receive another kiss quite like it from anyone else.

~ Three ~

STARS GLITTERED IN a dark velvet sky. A moon's smile was partially shaded by scudding, shapeless clouds. It was a windless night but nipped at the skin with winter's leftover chill, and Nigel shuddered against the cold and the excitement.

The country road had misted over, making visibility for him—and he was certain for all of them—a difficult task. The fog gave no sign of lifting as it meandered through the trees of Sherwood Forest, gaining substance as it made its way.

He looked at his companions and noted grimly they were no more than three hooded, voluminous, and darkly caped figures. They had purposely tethered their horses away from the road so that they could slink about through the heavy brush in the woods to the edge of the road without being spotted.

He hurried now to keep up and ahead of Seth, who scurried before him through the church graveyard on foot.

Seth tripped over a diminutive gravestone and released a soft curse. “Devil is in it! I’ve stubbed my toe!” The young Duke of Grantham groaned in pain as he bent to uselessly touch the booted area covering the injured extremity.

“Shut up, ninny!” Nigel returned in as harsh a tone as he could muster in a whisper.

“Bleater!” pronounced Lady Taffeta. “Working the night has its consequences.” His niece then giggled.

“You two will be m’deth. Sneck up—both of you!” snapped Nigel. He pulled a knit dark wool scarf over his lower face. “And, Taff, that ain’t no way for you to be speaking!”

“If I can slink about at night with you, I can swear with you,” answered the lady.

“Shh,” Nigel cautioned urgently.

“What the deuce?” replied Seth.

“Thought I heard something.”

“So did I, Nigel,” Taffy agreed. “’Tis a carriage—it would appear Dirty Barkins is going out after all!”

“We don’t know it is Barkins’s coach,” Nigel said thoughtfully. “I mean, we have it on excellent authority he is home suffering with the gout.”

“Aye, Nigel, but we had two possibilities—one that he feigned the gout to his wife so he could pay a visit to his mistress. If that is true, he would take the shortcut through the Forest, wouldn’t he?” Seth stuck in, looking thoughtful.

Nigel rapped Seth’s shoulder and then glanced pointedly at Taffy.

Seth coughed and hurriedly said, “I mean ... er ... well ...”

“Yes, yes, I know—married men have lovers on the side.” Taff shook her head. “I probably know more about these things than you do, Seth. We girls talk, you know.”

“Sauce box!” Her brother chuckled, apparently recovered from his stubbed toe, as he turned to lead them to their horses, tethered nearby.

After mounting, they walked their animals slowly down a narrow wooded trail towards a bend in the road.

The coach came into view, and for a short space they took a parallel path, until the moment they needed to follow on the dirt road.

They were ready. They were completely in line for what they were about to do, but something jarred in Taffy’s brain. Something wasn’t right; it was as though a bell kept clanging in her head, heralding trouble.

As she stared at the sleek lines of the coach, doubts began to shake her resolve. She tried conjuring up her ability to sense, to ‘see’ the future, but it was as though some force blocked her from doing so.

Interference in the form of buzzing in her head worked against her ability to see into the future, such as it was, usually only a glimpse. A face came to mind, clearing away the fuzziness, and it was the face of the rakehell Hotspur!

For when she tried to see the future, it was his face she saw. *Absurd*.

“Doesn’t look like the Barkins’s coach,” she whispered as she focused her gaze on the coach.

“It is probably new, bought out of the hides of his laborers,” Nigel said angrily as he led his nephew and niece forward.

“*I have a bad feeling*. Oh ’tis such a bad feeling,” Taffy told them as she shook her head. “I don’t like this. I just don’t think ...” Her words stopped

Nigel watched her for a moment, but when she didn’t continue he shrugged. Then he and Seth moved forward, armed and ready.

Taffy reached out and called, “Stop!” But it was too late. They were already caught up in the moment, riding hard, guns drawn and raised.

Nigel released a shot in the air, and then he and Seth took a stand in front of the coach. When Taffy approached, Nigel saw an awful, doubtful expression on her face as she rolled her eyes and said, “No...Nigel...” But it was too late.

Nigel and Seth shouted out in the accents they had perfected, “*Out wit ye! Come on, flash covey ... out!*”

* * *

The passenger within the elegant coach sat back leisurely. He was on his

way to the Red Hart in Nottingham, where he had been told there was sure to be a card game and a fancy piece or two that could please. He wasn't sure what he wanted, but he was restless, and this sounded better than a sedate evening by the fire.

Suddenly the carriage lurched to a halt. He caught himself from falling over, and with a soft curse began to rise until he heard a shot shattering the quiet of the night.

Imperceptibly, automatically, his hand found the small, neat, and deadly hand pistol he always kept hidden within his carriage. He held it in place even as he retrieved his dagger, long and threateningly sharp, which had been sheathed within his cape. He always traveled prepared. Damn, but if they thought they were robbing him this night, they would be surprised. He smiled grimly to himself as he patiently waited for his moment.

Ah, he thought, as he heard the blackguard's command. He shook his head, for these highwaymen sounded young. Nevertheless, they needed to be dealt with. He sat back against his squabs and disobeyed the command to get out of his carriage.

He sat silently, cunningly waiting for the right opportunity. He heard a lad, a very young lad with a high voice, growl once again and waited still longer. He knew this game well and knew just how to best his opponent. He hung back and was well able to see their approach through the window.

"*Looke, lads*, Barkins is afraid to show his phiz," crowed one young toby as he leaned over from the saddle to pull open the carriage door.

Within the carriage, Tarrant thought this crew seemed heady and careless from the way they approached their target. Again the voice of the toby closest to the coach sounded young in spite of the harsh, low-throttled growl.

Tarrant didn't allowed the toby to finish opening the door; instead, he shoved it hard and wide, catching the highwayman's horse head-on and sending the poor animal up into a high rear. He then quickly jumped onto the ground and stood in place as he roughly, harshly, tore the reins away from the toby struggling to keep his seat. As Tarrant tussled with the highwayman, he thought the lad must be younger than he even first realized, for the boy had no strength at all against him.

Tarrant glanced at the lad's horse, but it appeared to be nothing special. In fact, it looked to be an older cold-blooded gelding not meant for distance or speed. Odd that.

When he grabbed the toby's gun, he got the lad's glove in the struggle as well, which allowed him a quick touch of fingers that couldn't possibly belong to a man. They were small and delicate. He dropped the captured gun to the ground and kicked it away. In one easy movement he held the toby's horse near and pointed his gun at his captive's hooded head.

With efficient grace, Tarrant had taken control; he had done this before and with great success. He had been taken unprepared only once, and after that, never again. That was his standard. He allowed himself only one learning

mistake.

He held the horse's reins in hand, putting his hostage and the horse between him and the toby's cohorts. With fluidity he had reins and captive in hand.

The driver of the marquis's coach leaned down to retrieve the pistol at his feet, but one of the two highwaymen still mounted pointed his gun at him and commanded, "Easy now, covey, throw it away, fer though I have no quarrel wit ye, I will shoot ye if ye point that at me—and m'gun is already in place."

The driver did what he was told and sat stiffly in place, waiting to see what the marquis would do.

The toby struggled furiously, but the marquis had the boy out of the saddle and onto the ground in front of him with an ease that he found surprising. He bent and remarked in the toby's ear, "Too young, too small, and too stupid to take on the life of a toby, lad."

He saw the toby look at his accomplices and frowned over this. The lad seemed more worried about them than he did about himself. They had no way of getting to him, but they could take off and save themselves. They didn't—another odd thing.

Tarrant kept the toby's horse between the two mounted men and himself. He leveled his gun at the lad's head.

Wrong—it occurred to him that these men were either very inexperienced, or had made a series of mistakes that was making this all too easy.

As he held the gun to the young lad's head, he was not surprised to find the boy put out a small hand and worriedly caution his cohorts, "No! No, don't—jest run, lads, jest run." Then to Tarrant the lad added, "Right then, covey, oi'll do oi will ... won't oi?"

"What?" one of the hooded highwaymen cried to the hostage. "And leave ye? Are ye daft?" He turned his attention to Tarrant. "Leave the lad be, flash—no 'arm done, and it wasn't 'is fault now, was it ... 'im being so young."

So these three were perhaps family or very good friends? Brothers perhaps, Tarrant thought as he listened to this exchange.

"Get out of 'ere, m'blokes! Save yerselves—go!" cried his hostage.

Instead, they shouted threats at Tarrant, and then one toby tried something else, something close to pleading. "I disremember when I've made sech a muddle of me rig," he said in a Yorkshire dialect. "Ye ain't the right party—no, ye ain't. So if ye'll let me young brother go, we'll be on our way and treble ye no more."

Tarrant's beliefs regarding the punishment of highwaymen was stringent. He thought they should be dealt with harshly and made an example of to deter others. They were a dangerous lot that often took more than money and jewels. He would not tolerate them or show mercy, and yet ...

As he held the lad pressed up against his body, something disturbed him about this particular hightoby. For one thing, the shape of the young toby's

bottom against his thighs felt—*bloody hell!*

Just a moment now ... this wasn't right. Wafting past his nose was a hint of a familiar perfume—*rose water*—and *hell and fire*, he was getting a damn hard-on.

He twisted the lad around, and both the lad's hood and scarf went askew. Even in the dark and the fog, the toby was too close for him not to know.

He stared into her eyes with complete shock, and for the first time in a long time he was left totally speechless and totally entertained.

Oh famous, he thought. *If I had been drinking heavily, I would have an excuse for this dream. It must be a dream, because this can't be possible, and yet, here she is, the Lady Taffeta—playing at highwayman!*

She made a frantic attempt to pull free, but he yanked her hard. The next thing he knew, he had her spun around and she'd landed, wrapped nicely, in his arms. Her cloak parted to display the blousy white shirt she wore, and her full, firm breasts pressed into his chest as he held her close. His other arm went around her trim waist, and he was stunned and uncertain just how to proceed from there. This was absurd. *Damnation and brimstone!* What was he going to do? Here was Lady Taffeta in his arms, which meant the two riding with her were the young Duke of Grantham and his uncle, Lord Nigel.

He could just own to knowing them and let them proceed on their way, but perhaps he should play with them for a bit longer?

He remembered her small handgun in the dirt and kicked it farther away. Then he told the two men on horseback jabbering threats at him to stuff it. He was going to allow the lads to save face, but he meant to have a little fun with the lady. She knew that he knew; he had seen dawning in his eyes and had heard her gasp. There was no doubt, and he whispered in her ear, "Well, well, my lady, what do we do now?"

He wanted to play this out, and for that he needed time, so he maintained a gun pointed at her while telling the boys, "This lad is dead if either of you make one move." His tone was ominous, for if this was a prank, they needed a lesson to wake them up to reality. His threat worked—one lad was nearly foaming at the mouth with fear, and he nearly felt a moment's pity for him; the fear, he could see, was for the girl in his grip.

"Now, guv, ye won't want to be 'urting the lad," the one he suspected to be the Duke of Grantham said. "It ain't 'is fault, ye know, so let 'im go. Do, and we'll be calling it a night, *even-steven*—what ye think of that?"

He turned Taffy once more and, holding her rump against his shaft, for one moment closed his eyes as sensations traveled through him. He managed to set desire aside but continued to hold her tightly as he murmured, "Right then, little toby, we shall deal, you and I, because it amuses me to do so." He looked at the lad he assumed was her brother under the knitted dark scarf and hood. "I tell you what, my friend. I'd be willing to release you two—but *not this one*. I should like to keep this lad for a bit longer."

One toby spluttered to the other, "No! No," and then he turned to Tarrant.

“Oi couldn’t do without m’brother. Oi would be beholden to ye, sir, if ye would let ’im go ...”

“What could you do for me in return? Naught, I think.” Tarrant meant to teach them all a vital lesson.

All at once, she surprised him by saying softly, and only for his ears, “Let them go, and me as well, Tarrant. You may take my promise that I shall repay the debt when you call it in.”

He grinned wickedly. “Fair enough,” he said and then, to banish any doubt of her future fate in this regard, he allowed his hand to slide to her waist under her cloak. She was playing a dangerous game. What if he had been someone else, someone who had no scruples about how to interpret a promise such as that from an attractive young woman? Lady Taffeta needed a life-altering lesson. He said in a low, husky voice, meant to show her what she was up against, promising such things, “I just might hold you to it.”

“Arse,” she hissed quietly. She then pulled the hood lower over her forehead. He supposed this was for her brother’s sake. She wouldn’t want him to know about the ‘deal’ she had made to save them from this night’s work.

She moved away from him, and he said lightly, “Go then ... no harm, and fare thee well.”

He then set Taffy’s quiet horse in place for her to mount, moved in close to her, and whispered, “I shall see *you* in London.” With a marked drawl, he added, “Make no mistake.”

“I am afraid so,” she answered coldly as she swung herself into her saddle.

In response to this, Tarrant laughed, greatly amused.

What the driver of Tarrant’s coach thought of all these proceedings, he immediately voiced as he watched the three highwaymen ride off into the darkness. “Ye jest going to let ’em ride off then?”

Tarrant only laughed again. “Aye, they aren’t any good at this profession, and I suspect they mean to give it up,” Tarrant said before giving another chuckle.

“Will ye still be wanting me to take ye to the tavern, m’lord?” the driver asked with a frown.

“No, Dods, I think I have had enough entertainment for one evening. Let’s return to my aunt’s and make an early day of it back to London tomorrow.”

As his coach lumbered forward, the rakehell Hotspur put his head back against the leather squabs and thought of Taffeta. She was a rogue, much like himself, and he fancied she knew the rules well enough; otherwise would she have promised herself away so freely? Why were they playing at highwaymen—robbing unsuspecting people in the night? Why act the part of hightoby? Why did her brother and uncle allow it? For the thrill of it? He could not believe that. This had to do with the Luddite movement. Were they perhaps playing at Robin Hood? Oh no, how absurd! But ... it made sense, given their

heated conversation about the movement. They were young, full of ideals—perhaps that was exactly what they were doing? Fine, but then why let their sister join them in such a dangerous sport? It was unthinkable. Again, they were so young, so foolish. What they all needed was a lesson.

What did he care if they needed a lesson or not?

He did care. Odd that.

* * *

The Rogues Three rode until they were out of sight, and then, all of them breathless, pulled their horses up and allowed the steeds to slowly walk into the thick of the woods. They sat their horses stiffly, each unable to speak after their terrifying experience.

Finally, Nigel broke the silence and exclaimed, “I can’t believe he let us go. What did you say to him, Taff?” He then turned to his nephew. “Seth, your accent was absolutely prime. *Well done.*”

“I’m sorry. This, this is my fault,” Taffy said, changing the subject away from his question. “I had a ‘bad feeling’ when the coach approached and should have stopped us, but I didn’t get enough of a warning in time and absolutely no vision at all ...”

“Never mind that! We narrowly escaped, that’s what—and that Hotspur,” Seth said. “How he came out ready to take all three of us on.” Taffy caught the note of admiration in his tone.

“By Jove, yes,” Nigel agreed. “And Seth, did you see the way he managed Taffy’s horse? He kept it between us the entire time while he held onto Taffy!” He shook his head. “We were in a damnable fix, and it wasn’t your fault, ol’ girl,” he said to Taffy. “I mean—what could you do?”

She thought of her promise to the Hotspur. She had done what she could do, may the fates save her. Would he call in his debt? Or would he simply choose to humiliate her to amuse himself?

She sighed. “Right then. No time to do more than ride to the meeting now and tell them there shall be no more of the Rogues Three. They are officially retired.” She smiled to herself at the sight of the boys’ shoulders slumping. It was time they all grew up a bit and began handling their political points of view in a different manner.

She started off toward the small cabin where the Luddites had chosen to hold their meeting this night. Every week it was a different location.

As their horses weaved their way through the woods to the small clearing that housed a farmer’s cottage, her brother and uncle were still babbling on about ‘Hotspur this’ and ‘Hotspur that’. She rolled her eyes and went deep into thought. Her future now had a black cloud hanging over it, and its name was the rakehell Hotspur!

“Well, we are done playing Robin Hood,” said Nigel. “It has been good fun, but can’t risk it anymore.”

“More than fun. There has been a certain amount of justice robbing the

worst of the mill owners in the name of the movement—calling out their sins against them while they stand there and hand over their money,” Taffeta added with a sigh as she dismounted.

“Aye, but ’tis at an end now.” Her brother added his own heavy sigh.

“The thing is,” said Nigel, “what end does it accomplish? It simply hasn’t served to help their situation, has it?”

“We must tell King Lud he needs a new approach,” Taffy said thoughtfully.

Her brother and uncle looked at her and then at each other, and Nigel said, “She is a knowing one.”

“Aye,” her brother agreed with a proud tone. “That she is.”

It was later, much later that the ‘knowing one’ lay in bed telling herself she wasn’t very ‘knowing’ at all. Hotspur was bound to call in her debt to him, and soon, and then what would she do? Would she go to his bed willy-nilly? Was that why she had the vision of him naked?

He was reputed to be a connoisseur of women, a rogue of hearts, and would no doubt subject her to ... to ...

She closed her eyes, thought about his kiss, and licked her lips in spite of herself. *Faith!* She was going to have to add *tart* to the list of names she was compiling against herself. However, this name did not really make her close her eyes in shame. Indeed, when she thought of being a tart in Hotspur’s arms, she wasn’t ashamed at all.

* * *

It was the end of April in the year 1813, and London was in a convulsion of activity. Jane Austin had captivated the Prince Regent with her *Pride and Prejudice*, which so very closely mirrored the Regency society.

Lord Byron amused his peers with his scandals. And Lady Caroline Lamb added to those scandals by taking his book, his ring, and copies of his letters, as she couldn’t bear to part with the originals, and burning them in the public square.

London’s *haute ton* lived for these things, tittering gleefully over every new escapade in which anyone who was anyone managed to become embroiled.

As sister of a duke and niece to a lord, Taffeta should have been prepared for such flurries and wayward talk, but the sorry truth was that she was, in spite of her class, used only to country ways, country hours, and country manners. She found the *haute monde* a shallow group of fashionmongers bent on entertaining themselves at the misfortunes of others, and she heartily wished she could turn on her heel and return home. However, her aunt Sissy had plans for her, and her uncle and brother were busy taking their idealistic causes to Parliament.

Her male relatives had taken lodgings in Duke Street, and she was no longer constantly in their charge. But even so, her aunt allowed her a great

deal of license, saying only that she must do her proud and align herself with the match of the season.

“And who would that be?”

“There is only one, but no one, not even you with your style, name, and fortune, stands a chance of catching him.” Her aunt sighed.

“And he is?”

“Why, Lord Tarrant of course,” Sissy said, waving her hand in dismissal. “But forget that—there are others, many others,” her aunt declared as she led her out of the dressmaker’s and then down the street.

“Really?” Taffy rolled her eyes. “As though I would want such as him!”

“What? Don’t be absurd—any young maid would want him! Faith, *I* want him!” Her aunt Sissy laughed like a schoolgirl, making Taffy smile.

A friend called to Sissy, and after introducing her to Taffy, her aunt fell into conversation with her friend. Taffy wandered away a few steps to look at the park across the avenue with longing. *If only I could just go for a walk alone.* It was such a lovely day, sunny, with a delicious breeze. Fashionables strutted to and fro, and she admitted to herself that London was quite intriguing.

Sighing with pleasure, she turned then and bumped right into the rakehell Hotspur himself. He held her in place while she looked up and found his twinkling dark eyes perusing her from her bonnet to her toes.

“Well, well,” he said softly, and his voice went right through her, all of her, like a caress. “If it isn’t the little hightoby in the flesh.”

“Oh do hush,” cried Taffy with a desperate note. It didn’t occur to her to pull out of his hold, but he dropped his gloved hands and laughed as he said lightly, “Blushing? No need, never fear, sunbeam, I don’t mean to give you away. I have a better way to call in my debt than to torture you with threats of disclosure.”

“I am certain you do,” she said ruefully.

He smirked. “Are you trying to find a way out of your promise?”

“If I could, I would.”

He laughed again and touched her nose. “Then I must call in my debt soon, very soon, before you outfox me.”

“You are a scoundrel!” she muttered under her breath.

“How astute of you to realize it, though as yet *you* have no cause to say that,” he snapped with a frown, his expression turning dark.

“Taffy!” called Nigel from across the avenue, rushing toward her and Tarrant with a worried look flitting over his face.

Tarrant’s eyes twinkled again, and she wondered at it. What did he find so very amusing? She had just called him a scoundrel.

“Glad I found you,” Nigel said, looking more than a little nervous. He nodded a quick hello to Tarrant and tried to catch his aunt’s attention by looking her way and flashing his eyebrows to no avail.

“Why were you looking for me?” Taffy asked in surprise while studying

his antics with some puzzlement. What was wrong with him?

"Well, wasn't, but all the same ... need to talk to you." He turned an apologetic look toward Tarrant, who inclined his head and excused himself. He sauntered away and down the curbing, giving Taffy a touch to his top hat and a smile only she could interpret as he left.

"Whew, what did *he* want?" Nigel looked after him anxiously.

"Never mind him," Taffy said with a wave of her hand.

"Never mind him!" said her aunt Sissy, suddenly joining them. "I purposely kept Gertie in conversation so Taffeta could have a private word with Tarrant, and what must you do, Nigel, but burst in on them! *How could you?* And, dearest," she said, looking to Taffy, "I did not realize you were acquainted with Tarrant. Of all the good fortune, and with all the world watching! Wonderful that his lordship showed you a decided preference. Oh ... *this will make your season.*" She sighed happily before asking, "And what did he want, dear—anything in particular?"

Their aunt, however, did not wait for an answer but went on babbling about the number of passersby who'd noticed the Hotspur smiling and laughing with Taffeta.

Her aunt paused to take a breath and look at Taffy with new interest.

Observing this, Taffy waved it off. "Oh, just the usual."

Nigel snorted. "I sincerely hope not. Hotspur's *usual* is not yours!"

"Stuff!" snapped Lady Taffeta. She had had enough for one morning of everything and everyone.

* * *

Lord Tarrant moved off, rounded the corner, and entered the hallowed halls of the famous men's club known as White's. The little yellow-haired beauty, Lady Taffeta, was driving him mad with her pouty cherry lips, her bright gray eyes, and a body that promised sweet passion.

Was she innocent or jade? Had she learned, like some of her peers, to play passionate games with the lads when she was away at school? Was that why giving herself away came so easily? And, he wondered, why did it matter?

It mattered. If she was jade, it would be amusing to wrap her around his finger and make her his own. But if she was innocent, he could not—would not—ruin her.

He sighed over the problem. She certainly did not like him, and yet she'd made the bargain, knowing full well what the payment would mean. Where was the innocent there? He had come to the conclusion that their 'stint' as highwaymen was to play at Robin Hood. It seemed they had put that part of their lives behind them, but she had made a bargain with him, and it appeared as though she meant to keep it.

This irritated him. She had ridden like a man with the intent to rob rich mill owners—no innocent there. She had made a deal to give herself away to

protect her brother and uncle's reputation—no innocent there. And yet, something bright and sweet in her eyes told him she was in fact innocent. He needed to see this through.

One way or another, he was going to find out soon! He was going to call in his debt and see just what she did about it. If she was innocent, she would renege before she climbed into his bed.

The notion of getting her into his bed immediately gave him a hard-on, and he was barely able to respond when a group of his friends hailed him as he entered the club's main room.

A quick survey of the room found Taffeta's brother at the card table. Tarrant casually walked into the elegant green card room furnished for a man's comfort and approached the young duke. In his unhurried fashion, he watched Seth laugh and push his cards away.

"Well then, lads, I own myself fairly fleeced." He began to rise, though his young friends entreated him to stay.

One called out merrily, "Come on, green'un, if you leave, where is the use? There ain't another who will lose his blunt as readily."

Seth gave the lad an amiable slap across his shoulder, setting up a chorus of laughter, and then the duke turned to find himself looking at Lord Tarrant.

Tarrant smiled to himself, for he saw that Seth eyed him uncomfortably for a moment, and he could guess the boy was remembering the last circumstances when they had eyed one another.

"My lord," Seth said, sounding uneasy.

"Duke," Tarrant said amiably—damn if the lad wasn't blushing. "I have been hearing things about you in the House of Lords. Mean to have a go at them, do you?"

"Well, someone must. Nigel and I are staunch believers in change." He waited a brief moment and added, "Our system is addle-brained if it will not accept change with the modern world. We are overwhelmed with the injustices dished out to English subjects ..." He grinned, looking sheepish. "Do stop me—I know I go on and on. 'Tis a thing of mine."

"Not at all. I agree with you, but it won't be an easy or quick thing, you know."

"What won't be an easy thing?" cried a large, casually dressed man. He walked up, put a friendly hand on Tarrant's shoulder, and gave him an affectionate shake. "Easy? That isn't a word to describe anything you do, you old devil you!"

"Jimmy!" Tarrant said boyishly as he greeted his friend. "When did you get back from Leeds?"

"Last night, and I head about you and Bruton. Beat him again, eh?" He shook his head. "Don't know why you let him egg you into these things, Thurston. Dangerous man ..."

"Oh, and I suppose you think I am a puppy at his mercy?" His brow lifted.

James Fenmore laughed easily. "Take a damper. You know I meant no such thing, but that one doesn't play by the rules." He immediately changed the subject by turning to Seth and asking, "Now who is this young pup?"

Tarrant made the introductions, and soon the three fell into easy camaraderie. It was not long before they went off together to Jackson's saloon for a bit of 'sparring' with the champion.

All the while, and in his own fashion, he took the young duke's measure; he liked what he found. It didn't fit with the game they had been playing in Nottingham, and he still could not understand how or why they had allowed Taffeta to join in their prank.

He could see the lad was full of fire and brimstone and plans to change the world for the better. It was all so very intriguing.

~ Four ~

THURSTON TARRANT WATCHED the entrance Lady Taffeta made with Nigel on one arm and her brother on the other. Everything about her mesmerized him. He found he couldn't look away.

He could hear people all around him murmuring about her; one man nearby exclaimed, "She is a diamond of the first water." He felt himself swell with pride. Why?

He had witnessed the launching of Lady Marble's three daughters in the years past. She had produced beautiful seasons for each, and he could see she meant to do the same for her niece.

Lord Tarrant bent to Sarah Jersey, the regent's favorite and present mistress, and whispered in her ear. "A favor ...?"

She turned, and her words sounded hopeful to Tarrant. "*Rogue*. But do quickly ask away, for, Tarrant, you are the very specimen of a man, and I like you in your black velvets—and I am certain I would like you with them off as well." She laughed at his expression and her own outrageous tease.

He chuckled. "Ah, Sarah, I can always count on you."

Surprise lit in her eyes as she asked, "What is the devil Hotspur planning? For I swear you are, and it has naught to do with getting *me* alone and in your arms!"

He smiled sweetly at her. He liked Sarah but had to walk a delicate line. He had to appear to want her but stay far enough from the edge. "Lady Marble has it in mind to strike up a waltz for the first dance. I thought you might sanction it for Lady Taffeta?" He purposely caressed her with his gaze.

"You lecherous thing! She is too naive for you. Just look at her, a famous beauty, yes, but those *eyes*." She sucked in a long breath and let it out. "Pure innocence."

He looked at Taffy in her white satin gown, which scooped low over her full breasts. She had chosen to offset the white with aqua threading throughout, and it was most charming. Her long, copper-tinged gold curls cascaded from the top of her head to the middle of her back, and wispy curls ornamented her forehead and ears. She was completely stunning. "Yes, I am, as ever a cad, but it is only a dance after all."

"It would ensure her season, and Sissy and I are good friends." She then rapped his knuckles with her fan. "Go on then—lead her out for the first waltz."

Lady Taffeta found herself looking up and into the Hotspur's smoldering dark eyes, and in spite of herself she was conscious of his charm. She felt warm all over, and a tickle of desire sprang up and teased her between her thighs in a way that made her want the feeling to last.

He smiled, took her elbow, and deftly led her away from Aunt Sissy and the elderly nobleman who had been boring them both. When Taffy looked back and discovered her aunt had used the opportunity to escape, she smiled to herself before turning a frown to Lord Tarrant.

"Just *what are you* doing?"

"Preparing to waltz with you, my lady," he said glibly.

"Really? They have not even struck up the music yet, and I have not been given permission from the Jersey to waltz."

The musicians, as though in his employ, began at that very moment to play a very pretty waltz, and Taffy's lips parted with surprise.

He chuckled and said, "And as for permission?" He nodded toward Lady Jersey.

Taffy looked toward the great lady of Almack's. Sarah, Countess of Jersey, inclined her head with approval. Taffeta lowered her eyes in elegant thanks and looked up at Tarrant.

"How did you arrange that with the regent's woman?"

"Hush—we don't say such things out loud. You never know who might hear and carry it around that you are gossiping about her."

She sighed. "Yes, of course. You are right, and it wasn't nice of me either."

She gave herself over to his expert lead as he tooled her around the ballroom in exhilarating movements. Manners dictated she look at him and carry on a light conversation with him, but she couldn't seem to look anywhere but at his chest.

"I am so pleased you like it. I'd hoped you would," Tarrant said suavely.

"What? Like what?" she asked, bringing her eyes up to his face.

His smile was genuine, and his eyes glittered with amusement. "My waistcoat. You seem very interested in its design."

She felt herself flush. "Indeed, the embroidery is unique and sets off the deep black velvet of your coat." She smiled devilishly.

"You have such a naughty look in those beautiful eyes of yours," Tarrant said in a husky tone.

"And the tails of your coat, my lord, just the right length—oh yes, you are clothed quite beautifully." She continued to tease.

"A younger, less experienced man would be now yours forever," he murmured, "slain by your beauty, enchanted by your eyes, and bewitched by your sense of humor."

"But you are not a younger, less experienced man, so you are safe," she

said and gave him a saucy look. "You are all of eight and twenty—*quite an old man*."

He stiffened for a moment, and then she giggled. It must have won him over because he roared with laughter. Heads turned to see the Hotspur so animated by a debutante.

"Does London yet meet with your approval?" he asked softly.

She sighed. "I have been to London before, as a child. I was not impressed then, and I am not now. However, this waltz is quite fun."

He chuckled. "Lady Taffeta, we are kindred spirits, you and I."

"Do you think so? *I do not*."

"You miss riding your horse freely and unattended, I suppose?"

"Yes. My aunt says I would be gossiped about and that even I would not find London gossipmongers an easy thing to contend with." She remembered once more the pledge he had taken from her and stiffened.

He seemed to feel her sudden reticence, and he frowned as he asked, "What is it? What have I said?"

"Naught. You have only reminded me what an obligation I owe you—if I don't want to be meat for them to chew."

"Dearest beauty, I daresay you wouldn't give a fig," he answered with a shake of his head. "I can see you flicking a finger and putting up your chin at such absurdities."

"That is not quite true, my lord. I do care. I can't have my family subjected to such gossip, and besides that, there is the matter of the ... criminal proceedings that would ensue if that matter we refer to were to be leaked. I shall keep the deal I made with you, but it is for my family's sake, not for mine," she said quietly.

Taffy could no longer bring herself to look at him. How could he take advantage of her now that she laid it out for him? Did he not realize that if he were to reveal their secret, her brother and uncle would face serious charges? Of course he realized. He was a cad. She must remember that and not be taken in by his dark, warm eyes.

The waltz was drawing to an end, and he would have to lead her back. She knew she had not given him much time to respond, but even so, she had hoped he would relieve her of her promise.

Instead, he said quietly, "Ah, of course. We had a deal in which you took on a debt, a debt which you mean to repay, do you not?"

"I do not go back on my word."

He delivered her to her aunt, bowed, and walked away.

Her aunt hugged her. "Darling, *your season is made*! However did you get him to lead you out for the first waltz? He has never done so with any debutante ever before, I do assure you."

"Of all the absurd things." Taffy shook her head. "That anyone should look my way because Tarrant danced with me"

"It is the way of the world," announced her aunt happily. "You would

have taken the *haute ton* anyway, my dear—why, just look at you. You are a wealthy beauty and sister to an established dukedom. Of course, you would have been taken, *but now ...*”

And right on cue, two young gentlemen came to add their names to her dance card. She sighed, for now, now yet another thing hovered over her—she was indebted to the Hotspur for her popularity. How very upsetting. Grrr.

* * *

Tarrant had a nagging thought as he returned to his group of cronies and watched Lady Taffeta as imperceptibly as he could manage. The lady actually seemed to be waiting for him to call in his marker.

For some unknown reason this irritated him. Had she been with other men? Was she then no more than a thrill seeker? No, he knew in his heart that her words rang true. She had entered their deal to spare her brother and uncle. Did she, then, actually believe he would be such a blackguard as to turn them in to the authorities? This disturbed him as much as anything else.

Moreover, the fact that, without caring for him—perhaps at this point she even disliked him—she was willing to bed him, drove him mad with conflicting emotions. Innocence hung about her smile and her bright eyes. But had all the freedom she had enjoyed at home, with only a young uncle and brother in attendance, somehow given her a lack of morals? Would she bed him?

Had she bedded others? When he thought of her in someone else’s arms, he felt like he could put a fist through a wall, and that annoyed him further. *Why should I care? Because*, he answered, *because you like her*. Damn if he didn’t like the little vixen!

And liking her, he had begun to know her. Knowing her, he rather thought she was the sort who believed in ‘love’. She just didn’t have the ‘look’ or the demeanor of a woman experienced in the art of sex. Even her style of flirting was fresh and light. Yes, she looked an innocent, and *yet?*

He watched ruefully as she was led into the second waltz of the evening by the Marquis of Bruton—his enemy and rival in so many pursuits. He felt bile begin to form in his throat, and he had a sudden urge to tear the marquis away from Taffy and throw him out the window. What the deuce was wrong with him these days? He felt violence stir up inside him and couldn’t imagine where it had come from. He had seen Bruton ruin young maids before, he told himself, aye—but not this one! He was not about to let Bruton ruin this one!

He watched Taffy throw her head back as she laughed with obvious pleasure while Bruton twirled her round the floor. He watched Bruton’s hand on the small of her back and felt an agitation shake him to his core. *Damn the man’s soul!* She conversed with Bruton easily, sweetly, and looked comfortable with the charmer. He recalled she had not looked happy when he took her to the floor and had appeared relieved when the dance had ended.

Tarrant moved toward the musicians, and a notable sum was exchanged.

The waltz ended sooner than it normally would have; when it did, Tarrant stood ready to take up Taffeta's hand. She turned toward him—and he knew a moment when all air left his lungs. Her eyes, those bright, laughing eyes, looked askance as she regarded him, and he swept her with a quick glance, feeling heat beat a rhythm that pounded out her name in his blood.

Her voice held surprise. "My lord ...?"

Tarrant smiled enigmatically and took up her gloved hand, turning for a moment to the marquis. "Bruton, didn't think you would be back in London already." This was calculated to sting, for it had been Bruton who had tried to sway a race in his own favor by using his henchman to cut down a broad tree branch just as Tarrant had rounded the bend in the designated route. Thankfully his quick-witted and faithful groom had noticed Bruton's man and followed him in time to stop him before the many-branched limb blocked the road entirely. His groom had forced Bruton's man to help him remove the offending limbs, and he had won the race against Bruton and left him, once again, red-faced and out for revenge.

Bruton inclined his head a moment, but as he withdrew, his smile was all for Lady Taffeta. Tarrant was annoyed. He had apparently and unwittingly brought Taffeta to Bruton's notice by leading her out for the first waltz. He bent and said softly, "Now, don't be setting your cap at that one—he is a rake of the first order."

"Faith!" snapped the lady. "I have sworn to keep my handkerchief out of *your* path, and if you forbid me rakes and rogues ... la, who is left here in London?" She had apparently forgotten for the moment what lay between them, and her eyes twinkled at him.

He had a sudden urge to take her up and away, and his voice was a flirtatious caress. "Naughty puss."

"Answer the question, my lord—who should I set my cap for?"

He decided to play along with her game. "That young dasher there seems a catch, and a nice chap."

"Hmmm, not my sort. He would not approve of my antics, which I must confess to the man I marry." The light in her eyes danced saucily.

"Must you? Why is that?"

"Oh, if love is to survive the rigors of marriage, secrets have no place between a man and a woman—at least, not *important* secrets."

"And so this chap must know your foibles and still want you?" Tarrant teased her.

"Of course. In fact, he must want me *because* of my foibles. They will never go away, you see. Foibles might ease up with time and circumstance, but we are who we are."

"And you? Will you want a man in spite of his baggage?"

"Oh, but baggage makes us who we are. Of course, when I fall in love, it will be with my eyes and heart open."

"Yet," he asked, frowning, "you would give yourself outside the marriage

bed?"

"If I must," she said with a slump of her shoulders. "I ... I keep my promises."

"Look there," he said, pointing with his chin, wanting to change the subject. "Now there is someone you might want to drop your handkerchief in front of."

She wrinkled her nose and looked at another very handsome beau. "No, but I think that one." She nodded in a young man's direction. "Look, I like the yellow of his hair and the way it falls across his forehead—very attractive, don't you think?"

"You don't like him at all. Why, he looks twelve years old!" Tarrant laughed out loud as they watched the young man trip and spill his punch onto the dowager at his side. "No, that one would never be able to brandish a pistol in the dead of night and hold a carriage at bay."

She sobered at once. "Stop it. Oh ... how can you toy with me in this dreadful manner? I own that I am in your debt, my lord. What more do you want of me?"

"Ah, you own to it, but will you pay up when I call for it? I think not." He eyed her, trying to take her measure, taunting her in spite of the fact that he did not really want her to distress her. Why did he do this to her, he wondered fleetingly.

Later, when he returned her to her aunt, he bent and whispered in her ear, "Answer me now, and we'll have done with the subject. Will you come to me when I ask? Will you repay the debt you owe—for if you like, I can call in my marker, as you earlier called it, as soon as we can arrange the time." He was more than teasing her; he was attempting to get her to renege. He wanted her to see the deal for what it was, outrageous, and he wanted her to plead for him to forgive her debt. Why would she not do that?

"I do not break my word," she said, raising her chin, "to anyone, not even a scoundrel, for you are more than the rakehell Hotspur, you are the scoundrel Hotspur. Who else would have taken such a promise?"

He felt the flame of irritation sprint through him, and he bent low over her hand and said softly, "Excellent. You will do well to remember it."

All at once and before he had released her hand, he saw her face go white. She moved unsteadily, and he grabbed hold of her and whispered, "Taffeta, what is it? Are you all right?"

"Taffeta, Taffeta ..." Her aunt touched her cheek and turned to Tarrant. "We need to find her a chair."

She snapped herself out of whatever was wrong, though he saw that it had taken extreme effort. She pulled away from him and looked up at his face, blushing until even her lovely neck went pink.

Just what happened? he wondered.

~ Five ~

TAFFY SAT BACK and thought about the moment when Tarrant had been returning her to her aunt. *What must he have thought?*

She had suddenly been overtaken by one of her visions, and it had been so real. Usually they unfolded before her like a play on a stage, but in this one, she wasn't there as an observer; she was just there as the participant.

They were in a hayloft, and she was naked, lying back against a wool knit blanket. She was looking up at him, at his huge throbbing staff, and it wasn't the first time they had been together like this. They were lovers! Her debt had been paid and evidently repaid over and over again. She blushed to think about her vision. It couldn't be true.

No. She wasn't going to allow this to happen. Even if she had to give herself to him to keep him quiet about her uncle and brother—and her—it would be that one time only!

Tarrant moved possessively as he touched her, and his touch sent shivers of passion through her. She knew she had to get out of her vision, and she had managed to do that but not before he lowered himself to her, brushed her mouth with his warm, sensual lips, and whispered, "Sweet sunbeam ..."

Her aunt had called to her, helping her to break from the vision, and they had found her a chair. She had been filled with heat, not because of her vision, but because in her vision she had welcomed his touch!

Now, the morning after the ball, Taffy tried to vanquish this memory as her aunt preened and compliment herself on the success of her ball. She found herself squeezed as her aunt hugged her and declared jovially, "La, but all of London will be talking about it for weeks to come. I was so proud of you. Taffeta, imagine, dancing with the Hotspur—*twice!*" She clucked and went to the fireplace, poked at it, and turned to Taffy to add, "It bordered on indecent—twice with the same man, and that man Lord Tarrant! La, my dear, well done."

"Aunt Sissy, you make too much of it." Taffeta laughed at her antics and bit into a biscuit.

"La, but I do not. You two whirled around the dance floor. It was Tarrant's second waltz with you—and they are calling you the *new beauty!* You have become the talk of the season."

"Oh, Aunt, it is all nonsense."

Her aunt eyed her. "You are a diamond—la, child, and your taste in

clothing is perfection. That is a very fetching morning gown. The blue draws on the gray color of your eyes, and the fit is very alluring. Fetching, very fetching, for I suspect we shall soon have morning callers."

Taffy laughed and waved this off. "Thank you, but I do hope not. It is so pleasant just to sit quietly about this morning. I hardly slept last night."

As though to prove her aunt a fortune-teller, Jarvis, their butler, appeared at that moment and announced, "Miss Catherine Frome asking to see Lady Taffeta."

"Cath? Here?" Taffy jumped up with excitement and said, "Yes, Jarvis—do show her in. Thank you." She turned to her aunt. "Of all the wonderful things!"

"A school friend, dear?" asked her aunt.

"Yes, my very dearest," she answered as Catherine entered the room.

Taffy's excitement took over the room as she rushed to embrace her friend, and the two squealed with obvious affection for one another. It was a moment before Taffy remembered her manners and turned to her aunt to say, "Aunt Sissy, Lady Marble, this is my dear friend Catherine Frome."

Taffy adored her friend and was proud of her. She was tall, graceful, and sedate, and Taffy often giggled about how opposite they were. She bounced while Catherine glided. Even as she stood making introductions, she squeezed her friend's hand and said, "Cathy, you can't know how much I have missed you!"

Taffy often thought the two of them were like hot meeting cold and creating warm. After the introductions, Taffy pulled on her friend's hand, led her to the sofa, and inquired, "Cath, what are you doing in London? I thought after your season last year, you had decided never again would you allow your family to launch another?"

Before her friend could answer, the butler appeared once again. This time, however, he was amiably set aside as he tried to announce Seth and Nigel, who strode jovially into the room. Seth proclaimed, "There, there, Jarvis, no need to announce us—family, you know."

Jarvis inclined his head. "As you wish, your Grace."

"Much you know," Nigel said to his nephew in an aside, obviously continuing the discussion they had been engrossed in during their arrival.

"I am telling you, that ain't the way to handle it," the young duke answered. Taffy smiled when she saw him suddenly notice Cathy.

He put out his hand and went toward her, a very genuine smile lighting up his fair face. "Catherine! Dear Catherine Frome." He then surprised his sister by taking Miss Frome's hand and placing a gallant kiss on her knuckles. "Lord," he exclaimed as he came up from her hand, "you've quite grown up, and your eyes ... such a blue—"

"You must forgive him his rare form." Nigel interrupted, appropriating her hand from his nephew. "He hasn't yet given up his lease of infancy."

"Cath—ignore these fools," cried Taffy on a laugh. She had never really

seen Nigel and Seth make up to a woman. "Come on, Cath, take off your bonnet and be comfortable, for I don't intend to let you leave till we have had a nice long visit."

Catherine took off her pretty straw bonnet and placed it to one side of the sofa while Seth drew up a chair and kept her engaged in conversation. Taffy found she couldn't fit in a word as Nigel tried to vie for Catherine's attention as well.

Taffy rolled her eyes and said, "Gentlemen, the lady is here to see *me*, not to be badgered by you two."

Miss Frome laughed and patted Taffy's hand. "Oh, it is so good to see you—and them as well. You three are always so lively!"

Jarvis looked weary as he appeared once more and announced, "Lord Thurston Tarrant."

In spite of herself, Taffy felt a wave of anticipation. She knew she was dangerously attracted to the devil and meant to purge herself of this attraction somehow. She had to or own herself lost.

However, when he stood in the doorway, a giant of man, and his piercing dark gaze found hers, she felt herself neatly conquered and very nearly speechless. *Perhaps, Taffeta*, her inner voice whispered, *'tis too late, and you are already lost to the rake?*

Another voice could be heard behind Jarvis, who had not yet left the arched doorway of the morning room. Taffy's smile grew as everyone looked toward the sound to see who next would appear. Then Jarvis pronounced, "And Lord James Fenmore."

Taffy glanced at Aunt Sissy, who whispered, "*Both here ...*" This seemed to take her aunt's breath away momentarily, and then she added. "At the same time! Fenmore ... Tarrant ... the two most sought-after bachelors in London? Why, this will be the talk of the *haute ton* for the entire season."

Tarrant made his way directly to her aunt and bent perfunctorily over her hand. "Lady Marble, I am delighted to find you looking so well this morning, and after such a strenuous night."

"It was perfect, wasn't it, Tarrant?" she asked conspiratorially.

He winked, and it was obvious to Taffy he liked her aunt. "You know it was." With this he moved on to bend over Taffy's hand and audaciously kissed her wrist.

"You are a ravishing minx ... even in the morning," he whispered as his dark gaze swept over her.

She felt her cheeks burn. She had purposely donned a pretty, if somewhat low cut, blue day gown that fit her well. Why? She had hoped he might stop by. Why? She didn't want to think about why.

However, as she looked into his bright, hungry eyes, she rather thought she knew: she was falling for the scoundrel. *No—I must not!* She would have to do something to get him out of her thoughts, but how could she? She had a debt to pay; where, when, she didn't know—but it was hanging over her head.

The idea of him taking her into his arms and making love to her both frightened and thrilled her in the same moment. She had to scold herself silently, *He is a cad and a rake, a heartbreaker, a—*

She said softly, “Thank you.”

James Fenmore pushed Tarrant aside to take Taffeta’s fingers and bend over them. “Ravishing. How pleased I am to see you this morning.” He looked to Catherine, and Taffy quickly introduced them, noting how his eyes lit up as Cathy’s lashes lowered.

She smiled and looked to Tarrant, who had pulled up a chair to sit neatly at her knees.

“Your hair, loose and all about your shoulders,” Tarrant said, “is very fetching.”

She felt a fool and answered all she could think of, “Thank you.”

“Do you braid it for bed or leave it ... loose like this?” The look in his eyes teased her.

She looked around and noted everyone was involved in hearty conversation and not looking their way. She darted a look at him. “I like it loose ... and I sleep with only my covers to keep me warm,” she whispered. “Is that what you want to know?” Her eyes flirted outrageously. It was as though only she and Tarrant were in the room.

A maid arrived with a tray of refreshments, and Taffy laughed to herself as she watched her aunt flutter about in her fashion, popping a sweet treat into this one’s mouth, making certain everyone was served something as the jovial banter continued.

Tarrant continued to sit close to her, looking deeply into her eyes whenever the opportunity arose.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?” he asked with amusement.

“Looking at me like that, like you ... want to devour me. ’Tis not seemly—especially in my aunt’s morning room.”

“Would it be seemly somewhere else?”

She giggled. “Nooo, but do stop ...”

“I cannot,” he answered. “I was not aware that was how I was looking at you.”

“Oh, *downright fib!*” She gasped.

He laughed and took a pinch of air between his thumb and forefinger. “Just a little one, sunbeam.” He chuckled and leaned back against his hardwood chair. “Right then, tell me, are you enjoying London? I seem to remember you declared you would not, could not ...?” The twinkle was back in his eyes.

She dimpled up at him. “Ah, apparently I am more superficial than I thought, for I am enjoying London so far—immensely.” She then eyed him quizzically and said, “Have you brought your high-perch phaeton to town, my lord?”

“So you have already heard about my phaeton?” He grinned ruefully and touched her nose.

She found she liked his touch far too much, even on her nose. She regarded him playfully and added, “Indeed, and the matched dapple grays to draw it. I am told you are the best whipster in the land.”

“For once I am thankful for rumors if it wins me your company in my phaeton.”

She laughed. “Oh yes, I would love a ride.”

“We can go right now.” He encouraged her with a grin.

“No—how can we just leave everyone and go? Impossible.”

“Impossible? Not at all—we will just excuse ourselves.”

“Oh, my lord,” she objected with a laugh. “I am persuaded you don’t have your phaeton standing outside. That would never do for such high-stepping horses.”

“You are correct, but I can have them hitched and ready in no time. Shall I leave and return for you?”

She pushed at his arm, forgetting herself, forgetting what lay between them, forgetting that very soon he would call her to his bed.

“Ah, sunbeam, when you look at me like that, all I want to do is—”

Jarvis appeared in the doorway, and because no one paid him the least heed, he cleared his throat and loudly announced, “The Marquis of Bruton.”

All conversation seemed to float into the atmosphere and die as though a sudden fog had descended. Taffy heard her aunt say under her breath, “Oh no, oh dear ...”

Taffy noted her aunt’s reaction, but what she found more worrying was her friend Catherine’s response to his name. Miss Frome went white and sat quite rigidly beside her. Taffy bent to her to ask, “Cath? Cathy, what is it?”

“Naught.” Her friend’s voice was shaky at best.

Taffy watched the marquis with interest. He was certainly elegantly dressed. His dark green superfine had been molded to his lean form. His pale cream breeches looked as though they had been painted onto his long legs. His boots sported gold tassels at their heart-shaped tops. His face conveyed an expression of boredom, dissipation, and fast, hard living, but even so he was a handsome buck much in his heyday—or so it seemed to her.

Catherine’s hand strayed into hers, and Taffy felt her friend tremble. *Faith*, she was going to get to the bottom of this. What was it about Bruton that so worried Cath? Tension seemed to infiltrate the atmosphere and hang like a heavy, dark cloud. Obviously Bruton was not liked by the company who surrounded her.

Taffy got to her feet and walked over to her brother; she knew instinctively Bruton would follow, and she wanted to stop him from looking toward Catherine, for she acted like he was frightening her to death.

He did in fact follow Taffy as she came to stand beside her brother, and she said, “Seth, what news in Parliament of Wellington, and what is your

guess as to his future plans?" *There*, she thought, *that should get the men talking*.

"Devil is in it, so no one can hazard a guess," her brother answered with a frown.

"Not so," corrected the marquis, falling, as Taffy had expected, into the conversation. "Everyone has been guessing, but no one knows how far off his guess may be."

She could see he thought himself very clever. She also noted Tarrant was watching her with interest. It appeared to her the rogue players in the room each had their agenda. *Well, well ... what is Tarrant doing now?* He had risen from the sofa, leaving Catherine to his friend Fenmore, and was unobtrusively making his way toward her. She felt a trickle of anticipation. She felt a shiver shoot straight up her spine. She felt drawn to him as he stalked panther-like toward her as though claiming possession of his prey. Oddly enough, she wanted him centered on her, even if he presently thought of her as prey. She knew she wasn't—and she knew what she wanted.

Tarrant spoke to her brother, and she realized at once the two had developed a friendship of sorts. *How very strange*, she thought.

"I think you are in the right of it, Seth." To Taffy, he bent his head and whispered in her ear, "That was neatly contrived."

She gave him a brilliant smile. He was so knowing—so up to every rig. It was most irritating.

What then, had he had noticed her friend was uncomfortable in Bruton's company? Had he watched to see how she would handle the situation? Something inside her lit with pride. He had approved, but something else berated her. *Why should I care if he approves or not?*

The men went on to discuss Wellington and Napoleon, and she quietly returned to her friend, sat with her, and patted her hand. "What we need, Cath, is some private time," she whispered and was pleased when her friend nodded and gave her fingers a light squeeze.

Some moments later, Tarrant bent over her hand and said, "Tomorrow then, sunbeam—a ride with me and my matched grays?" His voice cajoled, but it wasn't necessary. She was more than willing to ride in a high-perched phaeton, for she had never done so before. She was also aware, all too aware, of the disappointment she felt when she realized he was leaving.

"Well, as to that, I could never pass up a chance to ride with you in your phaeton, now could I? I am told that to be seen in your company must add considerably to my consequence."

"Used, abused, and cut down in my prime by a snip of a girl!" he pronounced and chuckled heartily. He reached and tweaked her nose. His friend Fenmore nodded to him and said he would meet him at the club later, and then he returned his attention to Miss Frome.

Bruton descended on Taffy, who decided to keep his attention away from her friend. She used flirtatious banter to accomplish this and could tell her

aunt heartily disapproved. Later she would have to tell her aunt she was simply running interference because Catherine did not like Bruton.

Sighing heavily when she had a free moment from all these maneuvers, she realized what was most discomfiting was the fact she'd missed Tarrant the moment he walked out of the room. It was absurd. She wasn't even sure she liked him—how could she miss him?

* * *

Taffy knew all about Vauxhall Gardens. It was a deliciously opulent place where those who wanted could hide in the darkness and steal a kiss and more—so much more.

Weeping willows hung with a welcoming and sensual invitation, affording lovers their secrets from the curious. Tulips and daffodils were arranged in a wild, bold profusion of colors and were deliciously inviting to the eye.

Rogues, ladies, the elite, and the lowly strutted in their own style, as the Gardens were open to all. Youths laughed, dowagers clucked, and nearly everyone there felt at least a moment's thrill.

It was the beginning of the Season, and Vauxhall was ablaze with torches and newly installed gas lamps. Music filled the air. Jugglers and jesters paraded in mischievous abandon. Roués ogled, and Lady Taffeta drank it all in with innocent wonder.

"Cathy, are you as astounded as I?"

Her friend laughed and shook her head. "It is all a bit much for me, although I was surprised by Vauxhall the first time I was here last year."

"It is all so full of wonder and yet oddly appalling at the same time."

Catherine sighed, and then as though confessing a sin said, "I think I wasn't made for all this gadding about."

Taffeta laughed. "Isn't it absurd, Cath? I swore I would hate London, and here I am enjoying every minute, and you always swore London was just the place for you and have discovered that it is not."

At that moment their attention was captured by a jester atop the circular wall that framed an ornate fountain. He lost his balance and tumbled into the water, throwing Taffy and her friend into uninhibited mirth. When they had eased up on their laughter, Taffeta touched her friend's arm and said, "There—that is better. You are smiling. Now, tell me before anyone comes to interrupt us, what is wrong, Cathy? For something is, and why are you frightened of Bruton?"

"Taffy, I ... we ... this is not the place—oh look, there is Lord Tarrant!"

Taffy turned and saw him, and for a brief moment she was filled with a sensation she could not name. Then she saw an astoundingly pretty woman leaning into him and nibbling with wantonness at his ear.

Taffy felt a flood of emotion and immediately recognized it as jealousy. *Jealousy?* she silently asked herself. *Impossible.*

“Who is that beautiful woman with him?”

“Oh, that is the famous Mrs. Connors.”

“Mrs. you say?” asked Taffy, surprised. “But ... she is hanging onto Tarrant as though he is the only man in the world—and, Cath, she has her hand on his backside!”

“She does that and so much more, I am told, with every handsome nobleman she can find.” Cathy leaned in and added, disapproval coloring her tone, “She is the biggest flirt—well, I suppose she does more than flirt—in all of London. You see, hers was a marriage of convenience, and they don’t bother with each other. She wanted his fortune. He wanted to be plush with the aristocracy. He is a mill owner, a very wealthy one.”

Taffy sighed. “When I marry, I will marry for love.”

“I have found that a more difficult thing to achieve than we assumed when we were in school, Taffy—so much more difficult.”

Taffy frowned but could not pursue it as Seth called out as he approached, “Taffy, only look who I have found here!” He had the husky and amiable James Fenmore in tow. “I’ve invited him to join us in our box, which we had better get to right now, for the concert is about to begin.”

As he hurried them along, a squealing sound caught Taffy’s attention. She looked around but did not at first discover its source. Curious, she hung back a few feet while her brother, with Cathy’s hand in his, continued through the crowd, unaware she was not with them.

She followed the sound and heard the unmistakable yelp of a puppy in distress. It was with sudden blazing outrage that Taffy discovered a group of young ruffians, obviously in their cups, out to have their form of fun with a poor mongrel pup. They were dunking it in the pool near the fountain, nearly drowning the poor, hapless thing.

The puppy was all ribs, weak, and clearly frightened to death. Taffy didn’t think as she stampeded them and with one slapping movement dislodged the pup from the culprit’s claws. She held the wet, whimpering thing to her velvet cloak. “Heathen brutes, just what do you think you are doing?”

The lad appeared unabashed and angry. It was obvious he felt his manhood had been attacked. “Well now, whot we got ’ere? Quality is it? Lookin’ after a mongrel?”

“There will be consequences for what you have done!” she retorted fearlessly as she held the wet, shivering babe within the folds of her cloak, heedless of her gown.

“Eh now, that’s me own pup, and oi’ll drown him if oi wishes,” he brazenly answered with a swagger toward her.

Taffy hurriedly stepped back, scrambled into her cloak’s inner pocket, and brought out a weighty coin. She threw it at him. “There—now the puppy is mine!”

He picked up the coin and pulled an ugly face. “Oi’ll need more than that

if oi has to give 'im up.” He came toward her once more and reached for the pup.

Without thinking, Taffy reacted from the gut; she hauled off and smacked his face with her open-gloved hand.

He held his burning cheek, and his face was an expression of fury about to be unleashed. “Oi don’t mean to let ye get away wit that—no oi don’t,” he said as he raised a fist and moved menacingly toward her.

Out of nowhere, a mountain of a man appeared. He was all light and darkness, strength and power, control and fury, and he stepped between her and the ruffian. With one hand under the brute’s chin and fingers of the other hand tightening around the ruffian’s neck, he said, “I think you need to have some water to cool you down. Indeed, that is just what you need.” Down went the drunken lad’s head into the pool of bubbling water, where the Hotspur held him down for some moments before pulling him up by his collar and demanding, “Did you like that? Will you remember what it felt like to be helpless and at another’s mercy?”

In answer, the lad choked and spluttered. Hotspur shook him. “Get out of here, and I will remember your face, and if ever I see you hurt an animal—any animal—again, I shall dole out to you what you have doled out to it. Am I understood?”

Taffy waited, but although he opened his mouth, nothing came out. When the ruffian nodded his head vigorously, Hotspur pushed him into the waiting friends at his back and watched them all scramble away.

Her hands were full with the wretched puppy, but she felt an urge to applaud and hug Tarrant. Fenmore arrived on the scene next, and Taffeta said, “Oh my, you’re here as well? This is excellent. I would be so thankful if you will apologize to my brother and Miss Frome. I must return home at once, as this poor thing needs immediate attention.”

Fenmore’s brows were up with surprise, but he readily agreed. Taffeta then turned to Hotspur and said happily, “I shall call him George.”

“You can’t call him George,” Tarrant protested with great amusement. “You see, as cute as he may be, he is a mongrel, and you can’t give him the Prince Regent’s name.”

She laughed. “Right you are. Would you like to name him? It is thanks to you, after all, that he was saved.”

“I would like to hear you come up with a name,” he said softly.

“Then Valiant. Only just look at his sweet, brave eyes ...”

“Jimmy, thank you,” Lord Tarrant said to his friend. “I will see Lady Taffeta and her new charge safely home now.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask that of you,” Taffy replied at once. “You are here ... I am sure with, er ... someone ... and will be missed.”

“No, I brought no one here. I came alone, and *I am* taking you and your young Valiant home.”

“Yes, he is starving, poor thing, and I could never enjoy the concert knowing he needs food and care.”

Fenmore nodded and looked at his longtime friend Tarrant with interest as he bowed himself off.

Tarrant turned back to Taffy and asked, “And what of your aunt? Will she not be unhappy you have left her party?”

“Oh, no,” Taffy answered, unconcerned. “She said she had no desire to sit outdoors when the weather was still so cool. She is off with friends—some card game or other.”

He offered his arm and smiled warmly as she placed her hand in its crook and allowed him to lead her to his coach.

* * *

Tarrant helped Taffeta inside his coach and took the puppy from her to set him down on a blanket at their feet. The pup looked adoringly up at Tarrant, who shook his head and said, “No, don’t look at me like that. I’m not your benefactor.”

Taffy laughed, picked Valiant up, and snuggled him with her fingers and chin before putting him back down. Sitting back up, she turned a grateful face to his lordship. “It seems I am once again putting myself deeper in your debt.”

“I am well pleased with that.” He grinned and teased her.

She looked into his eyes. It was dark in the carriage, but she could see a strong, bright glitter in his dark orbs as he returned her look. “When do you mean to call in your marker and be done?” she asked, trying to press the issue, not sure if she wanted him to say he would forgive her the marker. *Part of her wanted him to call it in ...*

“In time ...” he said, his expression enigmatic.

She sighed. The next thing he did was to put his arms around her and draw her close.

“However, I wouldn’t mind a down payment,” he whispered as his mouth first brushed lightly over hers, teasing her with sensations. As her lips parted, his tongue found its mark and lapped at her own in an erotic, slow, and sensual movement that set her tingling with desire.

What was happening? It was a kiss—just a kiss, and yet, rockets exploded in her head and fireworks went off in her blood, traveling throughout her body. She gave herself to his kiss and realized she had been hungry for it—

waiting for it. What was wrong with her? She was behaving like a tart.

His tongue drew on hers and taught it a new rhythm as his hand moved to cup her breast beneath her cloak. She should have been shocked—not at his action, but at her reaction. She should have been horrified with herself, but she wasn't. She wanted his touch, and she owned it to herself.

"Taffeta," he murmured, breaking into her thoughts, "you are delicious, but that is all for now. It is bad enough we are alone in my carriage, without giving fuel to the gossipmongers. *We might be seen.*"

She was off her game, taken off guard, and she couldn't find the words to respond. She should have come back with something witty or offensive or ... But all she could do was lick her lips and look up into his seductive eyes.

He held her face with his ungloved fingers. "You beauty, you ... do you know what you do to me?"

"I know what you do to me," she surprised herself by answering him.

And then he shocked her by saying, "Don't allow it. You *must not* find me desirable. You must not think me as anything but the scoundrel you have called me. I have made a deal with you and mean to cash it in when it suits me—*remember that*. It is a deal—nothing more. That is who you must know I am. For I will never be more—it isn't in me."

His words slapped her in the face and ruined the dream. A dream that had developed because of her premonition, a premonition that was blocking her ability to have the visions she had come to rely on. He looked so serious. She had to buck up and handle this—it was all part of growing up, wasn't it? "Then call in your marker, and let's be done," she said softly.

"I am not ready to be done, but I shall call it in, sunbeam. Believe me, I shall call it in. Will you be ready when I do, or is it all bluster?"

She eyed him ruefully and turned away to pet her sleeping pup and stare out the window at the passing traffic.

* * *

Tarrant surprised Taffeta again when they reached her aunt's town house. He insisted on accompanying her inside and to the kitchen, where she rummaged for just the right sized basket.

"Do you have the *Chronicle* about?"

She hurried off and returned, waving the newspaper about. She smiled when she saw that he had cut out a portion of the basket to allow the small pup to get in and out of it at will. He seemed to know what he was doing, so she simply watched as he took the paper from her and shredded it into the basket, spreading a few leavings of paper on the floor around the front of the puppy's new sleeping area.

While she waited, she finely chopped some cooked chicken and fed it to weak little Valiant, cooing to him all the while. He fell asleep chewing on a final morsel, and Taffy sighed contentedly.

"Come along," Tarrant said, taking her hand.

“I mean to take him to my bedroom,” she answered. “But I will put him in here when I can’t watch him.”

Without another word, he dropped her hand, bent, and picked up the basket and the pieces of the *Chronicle*. “Right then,” he said.

“Well ... but ... you can’t ...”

“Lead the way.”

“You can’t go to my bedroom,” she answered, frowning.

“Oh, I can, and I will, but this time only to deliver your pup there.”

She raised her chin and went ahead of him to the stairs and then down the long hallway to her bedroom. She opened the door wide and stood aside to allow him passage with the basket and the sleeping pup. He placed it gently at the foot of her bed and turned to leave, but even as he started out the doorway, he turned, took one long stride, and wrapped her in his embrace.

His kiss was wilder this time, hungry, demanding, and she got lost in the passion it generated in her. His mouth on hers was in control not only of her lips but of her body, and she pressed into him.

He elicited physical and explicit sensations from her she couldn’t deny—and knew she would not feel for anyone else.

Friends talked about the magic of finding ‘the one’. They had talked about how a kiss should feel, but none had ever talked about what it felt like to kiss someone you wanted for all time.

Was the Hotspur ... *her one*?

His hand moved to her breast, sensually cupping and fondling, generating a reaction she was embarrassed to own. He taught her in that moment she was a woman in waiting—waiting for his touch, for what his touch could do for her—and proprieties and rules went out the window. She had always been a rule-breaker.

His tongue showed her how to give and bend to him, and then somehow he had managed to undo her gown enough to release her from the bodice, and he bent his head to suckle at her hard, yearning nipple.

She gasped with pleasure and made no attempt to stop him. She knew what she was doing. Maids were not supposed to give themselves before marriage. She knew this, but oh, she wanted him, had never wanted anyone like this before, and she whispered, “What am I doing?”

Suddenly and without warning, he straightened and backed away from her as though he had suddenly been stung. “I ... I ...” He inclined his head. “Forgive me ...” With that he turned on his heel and vanished.

What the deuce? she asked herself as she heard him hurry down the stairs and out the front door. *Faith and la—just what the deuce!*

* * *

The rakehell Hotspur leaned back against the plush squabs of his leather carriage seat and tried to call himself to order. *What the devil is wrong with me?* He had planned a convivial evening at Vauxhall and then a tryst with the

Connors woman just to get some physical relief from his constant hard-on. He couldn't remember when last he had been with a woman—and this one was driving him mad with desire.

The next thing he knew, he had heard Taffy's voice berating someone, and it was all he could do to control himself from killing the devil for even looking at her, let alone threatening her.

Then he'd looked at the pup, poor little survivor, and realized it had been starved as well as tortured, and his heart went out to the little Valiant as she'd named him. When he realized the pup couldn't be more than six weeks old, newly weaned, he thought every emotion had been pinpricked into action.

However, she then announced giving up her night at Vauxhall, giving up her concert to take the puppy home with her and nurse it. He found himself not only amazed but touched—deeply touched.

She seemed to constantly astound him with her actions, but what was worse, he was drawn to her in a way that just would not do. He wanted to do things with her he had never done with an untried maid. He did not tamper with virgins, and if that was what she was, he had no intention of calling in his marker or seducing her.

He felt something for her, something so strong he found himself constantly looking for her. When he couldn't find her, all he did was think about her. *Absurd.*

I am done with love. It served no purpose and led to pain. He was much happier as he was, enjoying his life and doing *what* he wanted *when* he wanted. Now look at him—playing nursemaid to a green girl who played nursemaid to a mongrel. This should have made him frown, but instead he realized he was smiling!

He would keep up the pretense of the so-called 'marker' because if she was not a virgin, then by all means he would satisfy his need for her. That was fair and just, was it not? A bit of sport. That was all it was, wasn't it? He was merely entertained by the Lady Taffeta—nothing more.

He was fairly certain he would never get the opportunity to get her into his bed, as she was undoubtedly an innocent. He would not break his rule and play with an innocent in that fashion.

Tonight when he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her and then began removing her gown ... when he'd been on fire and unable to stop himself from touching her breast, suckling her nipple ... *Damn*, he had been nothing more than a cad with a hard-on. He knew it the moment she whispered, "What am I doing?"

He had swept her away with seduction and had been no better than the scoundrel she had called him. Why had the fates played their nasty little game with him and sent Taffeta, the highwaywoman, to haunt his thoughts? *Why?*

A sweet tongue slowly licked cherry lips ... laughing eyes looked into his ... *Damn!* But the touch of her skin ...? He had to get her out of his system. Only one way to do that—avoid her as much as possible! Forget her.

Ignore her. He would do it. He would ...

That was the only way to break from the driving, raging need when she came into view—and then even afterward, when she was no longer in his sight.

A heavy sigh escaped him. Tomorrow he had promised to take her for a ride in his phaeton, yes, but after that, he would avoid the chit.

What made it all worse was he suspected Taffeta was beginning to fall for him. He couldn't have that—she wasn't up to snuff. The decent way to handle this situation was to forget all about her. But could he?

* * *

Lady Taffeta threw off her gown and stomped around as she donned her nightdress and brushed her long, golden locks. She looked in the mirror and asked her reflection, "What is wrong with you? What is wrong with him? What does it all mean, for goodness sake?"

She grimaced at the young woman looking back at her and shook the hairbrush at her. "You are behaving like a schoolgirl, an infatuated schoolgirl. You will end by getting your heart broken by a rogue of a man—"

Her conversation with herself, however, was interrupted when she heard her brother call out, "Taffy! Taffy!"

"Up here, Seth," she answered and went toward her door, but her brother was already there, flinging her door open wide and storming her bedroom, with Nigel right beside him.

He immediately spied the sleeping puppy and exclaimed, "So it is true!" He walked over and surveyed the wretched babe deep in slumber. "I hope Tarrant beat the hell out of the blackguard who hurt this poor thing! Why, its ribs are nearly out of its skin. I never! You did very well to bring him home, Taffy—proud of you."

She went to her brother, sank into his arms—a thing she hadn't done for many years—and then surprised them, herself included, by bursting into tears.

"There, there ... he'll do now." Seth patted her back and attempted to soothe her. "Couldn't have anyone better to look after him. There, there."

Nigel cleared his throat. "Indeed, and we will help you with his training. He'll be right as rain and, before you know it, taking walks in Hyde Park with you. What did you name him?"

"Valiant." She sniffed. Nigel and Seth chuckled in unison.

"So he is, Valiant indeed," remarked Nigel, bending to pet the exhausted puppy. "He'll do in just a few weeks time, aye. He'll do ..." He seemed to be talking to himself as well as to her.

She led them to the settee and indicated with a wave of her hand she wanted them to sit, which they did. Then she demanded, "Now, tell me everything—what of Cath and Lord Fenmore?"

"Fenmore ... Cath?" Her brother frowned, and then his face cleared. "Damn if you don't have something there. The man couldn't keep his eyes

from her. Noted it a few times but didn't think anything of it at the time, because he talked about you and how astonishingly in control you were in your efforts to save the mongrel and how you wanted to call it George." This made her brother burst out laughing, but she stared him down, and then Nigel cleared his throat.

"I noted it as well," said Nigel. "Noticed it immediately, and what's more, I think she likes him as well. For when he wasn't looking at her, she was looking at him."

"Oh, excellent, I so hoped it would take."

"Did you? Did you see it in one of your visions?" her brother inquired lightly.

She frowned. "Not getting any visions lately." She wasn't about to tell them she only got visions of herself in Tarrant's arms. She shook her head. "I don't know what is wrong, but haven't had any visions since that night we held up the Hotspur."

"Scared out of you!" Her brother snorted.

Nigel, ever serious, said, "You might have a point there, Seth."

"Well, did you two see Cathy home?"

"Aye, that we did, and all is well," said her brother.

Tarrant running away from her skipped into her head, and she thought, *Not so very well for me, no—not so very well at all.*

~ Six ~

NATTILY ATTIRED IN his caped black greatcoat, his tie superbly fashioned in the mathematical style, his superfine waisted and tailed coat of blue fitting his so very perfect body, his breeches of buff cream tightly molded over his muscular thighs, and his Hessian boots gleaming in their blackness, the Hotspur, Tarrant, took the ribbons of his high-perch phaeton. He then ordered his tiger to take position at his back and tooled his high-stepping dapple grays through the hum of London's morning traffic.

He told himself he hadn't dressed to impress Lady Taffeta, that this was his usual style when he took out his high-perched phaeton, but he knew in his heart it was a lie.

When he had regarded himself in the long looking glass, he had wondered absently if she would like the way he looked. He caught the question in his head and immediately berated himself. *What the devil are you doing?* She was a chit—a lass, a virgin—and all he could think about was getting her into his bed and driving himself into her in every imaginable position he had ever fantasized about. He was a cad.

She was a child, playing at games she knew nothing about. She was an imp of a woman. He shouldn't be thinking about her. He should visit Melody Connors and relieve himself of his raging and demanding constant need.

Even as these thoughts were driving him mad, he saw Mrs. Melody Connors standing at the curbing, flagging him down. *Should I stop?* He had no choice—she was stepping into the street. He pulled up his grays and smiled.

“Tarrant,” she said in a soft, alluring voice. “I missed you last evening ... wherever did you vanish off to?”

“Something unexpected kept me from you, Melody.” Though he automatically pitched his voice to be low and flirtatious, he was aware of a sudden impatience to be off. What the hell was wrong with him?

“How very vexing, but I trust you may find your way to me this afternoon, for a private bit of ... relaxation?”

She was a lovely bit of fluff, and he was sure to enjoy an hour's frolic with her in her bed, but ...

“I am afraid not, lovely lady—I am already otherwise promised.” He watched her pout and laughed to himself as he waved and tooled his horses back into traffic. He pulled up at Lady Marble's townhouse and nimbly

planted himself on the curbing, giving the ribbons to the young groom acting as his tiger. "Right then, Jason. I shan't be long, but walk them if need be."

"That oi will, m'lord," said the lad with a grin, obviously proud to work for him. "Probably will 'ave to if ye've come fer a loidy—all of 'em keep 'em standing too long."

Tarrant laughed and pulled the peak of the boy's wool cap down over his eyes. "Cheeky, but you are right. I don't think this lady will delay us though. She is a bit different than most of her kind."

He skipped up the steps and found Jarvis very civil as he showed him inside. He didn't have to wait at all. As he suspected, Taffeta must have been standing at the top of the stairs she was presently bouncing down toward him.

She was a vision of cheery life, an alluring figure clothed in a fitted aqua velvet driving ensemble designed to display her provocative figure. Her long, highly dressed, copper-lit gold curls cascaded down one elegant shoulder. On her tilted head rested a chip hat of matching aqua with netting and one twirling white feather. Short, thick wisps of her hair ornamented her forehead and ears, and her bright gray eyes twinkled impishly, without a hint of what had passed between them the previous evening in her bedroom. He could see she meant to put it aside and be comfortable. She was more than stunning. Everything about her enchanted him.

As she came toward him, he discovered the air in his lungs had been sucked out. He had to remind himself to breathe in and breathe out. The rakehell Hotspur, gourmet of women, prince of flirts, proponent of cynicism, received his leveler completely in that moment. And then he attempted, with careful reserve, to vanquish it. He told himself he had recognized she was incomparable at their first meeting. So, what was this? *She is not for me ... not for me*, he repeated silently.

With a calm demeanor, he went forward to greet her. Again, though, all built-in resolves were shaken, for what must she do but take his hand and shake it famously.

"My lord," declared Lady Taffeta, stepping back to eye him with teasing admiration while still holding onto his kid-gloved hand. "My, but you do look an out-and-outer, a regular dasher, a—"

He felt his lips quiver, but he restrained the bubble of mirth and admonished lightly, "Take a damper, sunbeam. We made one another a promise. *I don't seduce—you don't throw your cap.*"

"Ah, but you did not promise to not seduce, and I think that is what you have been trying to do to me—soooo, if my cap falls at your feet, you have no one to blame but yourself," the lady glibly said, her bright gray eyes laughing at him. "And you really do look absolutely—"

"Ravishing." He cut her off. "I know. I always mean to." He led her toward the front door.

"Oh, there you are," cried Lady Marble, sticking her face out of her morning room to wave them off. "Such a lovely day for a ride." She eyed

Tarrant. "Don't you dazzle my niece, sir, for I shall hold you to account."

He laughed out loud. "You needn't worry, my lady. Taffeta and I have quite agreed—we are both quite off limits to one another."

"Oh?" her ladyship replied with a note of disappointment. "Pity."

With this last, he led Lady Taffeta toward his waiting phaeton.

Taffy leaned into him and said on a giggle, "What you need is to be set down a peg. You are far too lofty, you know."

"Where is your puppy?" he asked, effectively changing the subject.

"Oh, the dear little man ate most of his breakfast and even tried hobbling about. He is so very weak but getting better. He is in the nether regions of the kitchen as Cook is very fond of dogs and will look after him while I am gone." She sighed. "He slept most of the night and only whimpered once for me."

"And what did you do when he whimpered?" He found he couldn't look away from her eyes.

She smiled softly and sighed again. "I cuddled him and put him back to sleep. We gave him fresh paper in his basket this morning, but Cook has a method of housebreaking and will start teaching him as soon as he is strong enough. In the meantime, I have promised to help her clean up his basket and supply her with fresh newspaper, so we must get a great deal of them."

He burst out laughing and helped her into the carriage. "Yes, I am familiar with the method of housebreaking a pup." He shook his head and laughed again. Never was there such a chit! Her conversation was so natural, and he almost admitted in that moment that he felt something more than lust for her—but what did he feel? *Love*? No, love could not, would not work for him. He didn't believe in love—it was no more than ... No. Love was an impossible emotion, and he certainly was not about to—

"Tell me, my lord," said the lady, bringing him out of his cogitations, "have you been abroad?"

"Aye."

"Not just to Paris, where my parents took us when we were still so young, but—"

He grinned. "Yes, I know what you are asking. One of my favorite places was Venice."

"Oh, I do so want to go to Venice—gondolas and history and Italians."

He laughed once again as he tooled his horse through the London traffic toward Hyde Park. "You are a wonder. I never know what is in that busy brain or what you will say next."

"I hear Italy has some very plausible rascals?" she asked, ignoring this.

"Aye, you would find yourself very comfortable there," he answered teasingly.

She inclined her head, but her eyes were lively when she brought her gaze up to his. "A flush hit, my lord."

"Then I must make it up to you by letting you decide our destination—a

sedate ride through the park or somewhere else?" He pulled up his pair of dapple grays as he eyed her, looking for a response, and once again found himself caught up by her bright gaze.

"The Peerless Pool!" she announced, looking like a schoolgirl.

"No—absolutely not, funny little brat. Who the deuce has been telling you about the Peerless Pool?"

"Well, Seth and Nigel went there and enjoyed it excessively, but when I asked them to take me there, they became very stuffy and said 'twas impossible.'"

She tickled him in ways he had thought would never happen to him again. She looked so demure and innocent, and then she batted her lashes purposely, and he burst out laughing once again.

"Will you not, my lord?"

"Certainly not!" he answered jovially. "Taking you to the Peerless Pool would forever ruin your reputation. It would have been bad enough for you to be seen there with your brother and uncle, but *with me*?" He shook his head. "Disaster. Pick another place, sunbeam." He saw her expression and chuckled. "Don't pout."

She pouted at him, and he wanted to take her in his arms. She interrupted his thoughts by touching his thigh and igniting his already fully charged desire into a blaze he had to find a way to quiet.

"I don't know of anything else," she said, still pouting. "And I don't pout."

"Don't you? Ah, then it is merely a very good imitation of one." He chuckled, and then an idea came to him. "I know just what you would like—I rather like the place myself."

Her eyes opened wide, and he almost lost concentration as he stared into them. But then she grabbed his upper arm, and even through the thick wool of his greatcoat sleeve, once again he felt a titillating wave of excitement.

"Where?" she asked with a bit of a bounce.

He thought with some amusement that she was so young, so spirited, and so full of life, and he wanted her more than he would soon be able to control. He cleared his throat and answered, "The Royal Exchange."

"Sounds dashed flat to me," the lady said with a slight frown.

"You won't think so when we get there. It is where they house the wild beasts."

He had definitely hit upon the place in all the world she would enjoy, and she told him so enthusiastically. "Oh, oh ... I do forgive you all your sins. Yes, yes, the Royal Exchange!" She was quiet for a moment. "I have always wanted a monkey ..."

Shaking his head, he gasped. "Well, I am not getting you one. You may look—you may even touch where they allow, but we are not foisting any wild beasts on your poor aunt."

Taffeta laughed. "No, you are quite right. I have already turned her

kitchens into a kennel with Valiant.”

As he tooled his team around the corner, Taffeta exclaimed, “Tarrant, look, at that man! What a beautiful man—who is he?”

“Sir Francis, and it is not the thing to be pointing at men simply because their looks are pleasing. He noticed you.”

“Oh pooh,” she answered. “Men are forever pointing out women to one another.”

“It is not the same thing, Taffy. You simply can’t go about ogling handsome bucks.”

“Why not?” Taffy shrugged. “All the town bucks spend a great deal of time ogling the chits!”

He laughed in spite of himself. “Incorrigible minx!”

“Besides, he had such fine shoulders,” she teased him in answer.

“Bah, wadding,” retorted Tarrant, a bit irritated.

“Yes, but he was dressed to the nines,” she pronounced.

“Dandy.”

“Well, I thought him good looking,” she replied.

He eyed her suspiciously. “And so the Lady Taffeta collects her handsome beaux?” His voice was dry and touched with irritation.

“Now what does that mean?”

“Evidently you take it upon yourself to give as good as you get. The town bucks preen and ogle, and you feel entitled to do the same. Town bucks collect pretties—do you feel it your right to collect a list of hearts?”

She suddenly went serious. “*That is not nice.* Odd that *you* should take such a notion into your head. I rather thought you were up to snuff.” The tease had returned to her gray eyes. “You see, my lord, I don’t *ape cruel behavior.*”

Caught, he wouldn’t give it up. “You wouldn’t lead a man on?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then what of Bruton?” he replied triumphantly. “I rather thought you were leading him an excellent dance the other night.”

She raised her brow. “When I danced with Bruton, he did the leading, and it was most enjoyable.” With this, she read out loud, “Ah, the Royal Exchange!”

~ Seven ~

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Lady Taffeta's excursion with Tarrant, and she had not seen or heard from him since.

Moping about wasn't her style, and yet, she felt a fit of the 'blue devils' start to overtake her mood. It was time to own up to what she felt, and what she felt, she conceded, was a great deal more than infatuation.

She loved everything about him: His great big, hulking good looks. His dark, mysteriously lit eyes she could never quite read and that kept her guessing all the time. The way he moved, like a stalking wild beast, graceful and yet powerful. And, she had to admit, she loved his kisses, his touching—and wanted more.

What was she going to do? He was a rogue and had a slew of women all vying for his affection and his bed. He didn't want her, not really, for he hadn't even called in her marker, and it didn't appear as though he meant to do so.

He probably thought she was nothing more than a silly schoolgirl. Maybe her kisses had done nothing for him? Maybe he thought she would be inadequate in bed? On that score, he might be right. What did she know about the art of making love? She shook her head over the problem. *Naught*—except what she and her friends had whispered about and giggled over in the dark of night when she had been at school.

However, her aunt constantly clapped her hands together and declared she was in heaven. Sissy told her the rakehell Hotspur had gotten her coined the 'incomparable' amongst the *haute ton*. How absurd. But apparently Tarrant had never before given a marriageable chit so much public attention, and it had everyone jabbering with excitement and speculation.

The last two mornings had been overloaded with callers, and she was heartily weary of the entire social scene. Each time Jarvis would appear, she would look hopefully, only to find it wasn't Hotspur ...

And her dear Cathy! That was another problem she was going to have to solve. Something awful had happened to Cathy, but although she had tried, she could not get her to speak about it. All she knew was it had something to do with Bruton, and Bruton was ever lurking about making her friend uncomfortable.

Taffeta wasn't sure what to make of him but flirted with him in an effort to get to the bottom of Cathy's distress, hoping he might let something slip

during their conversations.

Third on her list of matters to dissect and solve was the gentleman Lord James Fenmore. He was besotted with Cathy, but Cathy kept him at a distance, and he had adopted Taffy as his confidante. He was always seeking her out and then mooning over Catherine and asking her what next he should do to win dear Catherine's approval.

Then, if those things weren't enough of a trial for any one young woman in her first London season, she had Nigel and Seth.

Her brother Seth had come of age and now had sole guardianship of her. He had been playing the superior card all morning, coming on strong, and she was heartily sick of it.

She sighed, for she would just have to let it all slide for the moment, as her aunt had already raised a glass of champagne—to her brother.

"'Tis only eleven o'clock ..." Her voice, even to herself, sounded as though she was whining, and she sighed again. She picked up a glass, rolled her eyes, and joined in the birthday toast to her brother.

A sip later, she wrinkled her nose but said, "Hmm, lovely ..."

Seth laughed, and Nigel said, "Another toast from me, nephew. Here's to you, Seth. Thank Jupiter, the brat is now yours to order about."

"No one can order me about." Taffy rounded on them. "The very idea," she said, teasing back and then turned to Nigel. "Look who is going all fashionable—that is an oriental knot you have sporting your tie."

"Well, one must keep up if one wants to be taken seriously, and I do think our arguments in Parliament have not been for naught," retorted Nigel.

"What are you talking about?" Seth looked scornfully at him. "After you gave your speech, they called you a radical."

"Yes, but then Lord Byron got up, and his speech silenced everyone. It was quite beautiful."

"Read the last paragraph," Seth entreated, "where he speaks about the bill."

"What bill?" Lady Marble asked, showing some interest.

"A death penalty has been proposed for all Luddites caught smashing frames and looms," Nigel explained.

"You cannot mean it?" Taffeta cried.

"Indeed, a death penalty is severe, but something must be done to stop the destruction of property."

"Yes, something must be done—pay them a decent wage so they don't starve," Taffeta argued hotly.

"Aunt Sissy, Taffy, listen to Byron, for he is so very eloquent on the subject," Nigel said and then began reading: "*Suppose it passed. Suppose one of these men, as I have seen them meager with famine, sullen with despair, careless of life which your lordships are perhaps about to value at something less than the price of a stocking-frame ... suppose this man—and there are ten thousand such from whom you may select your victims—is dragged into court*"

to be tried for this new offense by this new law. Still there are two things wanting to convict and condemn him, and these are, in my opinion, twelve butchers for a jury and a Jefferies for a judge."

Taffy clapped her hands and pronounced, "There you are. Lord Byron is a much better man than I was led to believe. I shall most certainly seek him out and applaud him—"

"No, you shall not," admonished her aunt. "He is not the sort of man you should be interested in." She added, "Nor is the Marquis of Bruton."

"What had Lord Tarrant to say about the bill?" Taffeta asked as casually as she could.

"He was absent," answered her brother.

"You mean he did not take a seat for such an important meeting?"

"No, but it wasn't going for a vote yet, though it does look as though the Tories will have their day, and the death penalty will pass."

"No! Oh, no ..." Taffy cried. "I cannot believe Tarrant did not stand up against the bill ..."

"What is all this interest in the Hotspur?" asked Nigel.

She colored up. "I have no interest in him as such, only in the fact that I have learned he carries a bit of weight among his peers. He is not, by his own words, a Tory."

"No, he is not a Tory," Aunt Sissy stuck in. "But I have never known him to take an active part in politics."

"Besides, I suspect he is out of town," said her brother.

At that point, Valiant appeared in the open doorway and wagged his tail. She regarded him with interest as he eyed the people he had surely grown to love and started to make his way toward her. She knew he must have made some effort to escape the kitchen and sniff his way to her. Apparently exhausted, he plopped down only a few feet from the doorway.

Taffy laughed and ran to pick him up. Snuggling him, she took him back with her to the sofa and allowed him to sleep in her lap. "Is he not beautiful, Aunt Sissy?"

Her aunt regarded him approvingly. "I must say for a mongrel ... his black and white markings are quite outstanding. He looks as though he might have Border Collie in him. Yes, he is quite a nice little thing."

Jarvis appeared and announced, "The Marquis of Bruton."

"Drat!" said Nigel.

"Loose fish," Seth whispered. "Don't like the blasted fellow."

"You may show him in Jarvis, thank you," Aunt Sissy said, giving them a reproving look.

Seth looked surprised. "Didn't think you liked him either."

"Don't ... but he runs with Prince Regent, and one does not wish to make enemies in that quarter unnecessarily."

Taffy had very definite views about Bruton, but she wasn't letting on just yet. She rather thought she might need to further a friendship if she were to

solve her dear friend's problem, so she kept her thoughts on Bruton to herself.

At least with her, he had never overstepped, and he had never bored her—he had that, and probably *only* that, in his favor, for as he walked into the room she once again concluded he thought too much of himself.

After placing a perfunctory kiss upon her aunt's hand, he bent over hers and said, "I have gone through the agony of sitting in hell waiting for this moment."

He brought himself up from her hand and nodded to her brother and uncle, who had no qualms displaying their open displeasure with him. They were polite, but just barely.

He took up the back of a Windsor chair and pulled it near to where she sat. "May I?"

"Of course," she answered. "Or did you think I meant to keep you standing? I am not so heartless, especially to a man who has gone through hell just for me." She was tickled with inner laughter.

"Precious beauty, what I suffered before is nothing to what I suffer now," he answered adroitly.

"How so? I allowed you to sit, my lord." Taffy was enjoying herself immensely. She had this man's measure.

"Because your beauty always slays me, and yet I find myself coming back for more."

"And if I were out of looks—pale with fatigue, of ill mood and manner—what then, my lord?"

"Were you sick with fever, pale with weariness, still would I find you the most ravishing woman in all the world."

"Don't you believe the blackguard," James Fenmore said with an accompanying laugh, but it was obvious to Taffy he quite meant his words. On his arm was Catherine. Jarvis had no doubt thought it unnecessary to announce them first, as they were such frequent visitors.

Cathy's face went white, and Taffy realized Bruton was looking at her through his quizzing glass, deuce take the fellow, for she was sure he meant to make her nervous. Why?

"Cath, James—what a delightful surprise," she said and got to her feet with her arms open to receive her friend.

"Indeed, I met Lord Fenmore on the way here, and we walked together." Catherine bent to kiss Taffy's cheek and squeezed her hand. "It is a lovely day."

Pleasantries were exchanged and refreshments served before Taffeta was able find a moment in a quiet spot near the window to touch Cathy's hand. "Dear, this won't do. You must tell me what the marquis has done to offset you so."

"I cannot speak of it."

"And still you will." Taffeta regarded her friend intently. "Cathy, you and I have never kept secrets from each other."

Catherine laughed shakily. "That is not quite correct, Taffy dear. *I* didn't keep secrets from you, but you, oh, the secrets you have kept from me."

Taffy pulled a face at her, but they were being called back into the conversation that had taken over the room about the upcoming soiree for the evening. Taffy whispered, "This is not done."

"I know, Taffy." Catherine sighed. "I know."

* * *

The rakehell Hotspur tried desperately to keep Taffeta out of his thoughts, but the harder he tried, the more she would sneak up on him and laugh, and the sound—a sound he had grown to enjoy—made him long for her company.

He stood in the Home Office with Sidmouth and found he actually had to concentrate on the matter at hand.

"Look, Tarrant, if you don't want to get involved this time," said the Viscount of Sidmouth, Home Secretary, "I can release you from your obligations."

Tarrant stopped his pacing and rounded on the home secretary. "*Certes!* I did not ride to Dover and handle our little problem because I want out, and well you know it, so don't talk nonsense to me, Henry. You damn well know better."

Sidmouth laughed. "Calm down, lad. *Egad*, but that temper of yours needs letting. All I was ... well, you seem preoccupied—especially when I mentioned the Rogues Three in Nottingham."

"What I am is not preoccupied but at a loss to understand why the Home Office would be interested in such a minor apparition of the Luddite movement."

"Let us review the situation," Sidmouth said frowning.

"Fine." He would review and dismiss it, for no matter what happened, no one was going to know the identity of the Rogues Three. "But what you should be reviewing is the fact we have a leak in the Honor Guards unit."

"Then our problem is twofold. We must plug the leak, and we must stop the Rogues Three."

"They have stopped their aggression against the mill owners and, from the information I received, have packed their bags and left the county," Tarrant said.

"And brought their little ken here to London, if rumor is to be believed—besides, should they not be punished for their acts in Nottingham?"

"Not our job. The local authority is looking into it, and I don't believe that little band is one and the same with the three working London." Tarrant shrugged and looked away.

"My information may be wrong, but whether the London Rogues Three are merely mimicking their Nottingham counterparts or not, they still must be stopped."

"Indeed, I quite agree. These three scoundrels have a completely different

style. I can tell you that, as when I was visiting with my aunt I was in a position to learn a great deal, and those three never injured the mill owners they robbed. Our London three are murderers and traitors!" Tarrant said impatiently.

"If word of our plans leaks to Napoleon—"

"Then whoever these London Three are, we must not allow anything 'important' to be leaked their way. I have a thought on the subject."

"Aye, you may be right, but, Tarrant, this is an ugly business, and I caution you to watch your back."

The next hour saw them finalizing plans to get documents to their man in France. Then Tarrant bowed himself off, saying, "I damn well mean to put an end to this blackguard!"

~ *Eight* ~

AUNT SISSY LOOKED around Lady Darthborn's ballroom and turned up her nose as she leaned into Taffeta and whispered, "Cecilia means to outdo me with all these flowers and constant champagne, but she shan't because her ballroom is too small and her musicians only passable!"

Taffy laughed and said, "Naughty thing—but I doubt anyone can outdo the ball you gave me. It was perfect."

Aunt Sissy preened and sighed. "The marquis is just thirty, but remember, love, he has a reputation of being a heartbreaker. He trifles with young maids—so different than the Hotspur. Bruton takes the innocents and ruins them."

"How do you know this?"

"I know and look, Fenmore is making a cake out of himself for your friend, Catherine, but she scarcely gives him a smile. What is wrong with the chit?"

"I don't know. Something has made her ... cautious," replied Taffy as her eyes narrowed, and she made up her mind. "I shall be right back."

She knew the next dance was a waltz, for she had promised it to some young man, and she meant for Cathy to waltz with Fenmore. She hurried to them and managed to trip into her friend, knocking her right into Fenmore's arms just as the musicians struck up the waltz.

Somehow the young man, whose name she couldn't remember, managed to run her to ground and started to lead her onto the dance floor but not before she said, "Cathy, do not sit this one out too. Lord Fenmore, I am persuaded, will not dance until he has waltzed with you."

Fenmore winked at Taffy and took Catherine's hand, appearing openly relieved when she allowed him to lead her onto the floor. Taffy sighed happily, turned, and gave her dance partner a smile that instantly won her an affectionate expression.

She had only danced a few moments with her hopeful suitor when the Marquis of Bruton tapped his shoulder and ousted him with a derisive remark.

She looked up at Bruton's face and said, "That was not nice, my lord."

A soft, self-assured tone answered her. "Nothing ever is in love or war."

"I am not involved in war—or love. And I prefer ... *nice*."

He laughed. "I shall have to remember that, although nice is not something I do very often."

"So I have heard, and since you now admit it, I suppose I must, as people

advise, be wary of you, my lord.”

“You needn’t be, for I mean you no harm. In fact, I rather think I mean to make you my wife,” he said nonchalantly.

She was shocked and nearly pulled out of his hold. “You can’t be serious. You don’t even know me. I can think of only one reason you would want such a union, and it isn’t a pretty one!” Taffeta pushed at his chest.

“You mistake. I know what I need to know—you are beautiful, titled, and worthy of my name.”

“I will not have this discussion with you. It is most improper!” Taffeta said, pulling away and inclining her head. “I am sorry, but I am a bit weary and must find my aunt and take a seat.” Before he could lend her escort, she fled him and started wending her way through the crowd of dancers.

Two strong hands were suddenly on her shoulders holding her in place, and a welcome voice that nearly made her lunge into his arms said, “Sunbeam—steady now. Whatever did the devil say to you?”

“It was nothing.” She looked up at him and discovered it took everything she had not to sink onto his chest and make him hold her tight. He was here; finally he was with her ...

“Damn the man’s soul—it was something. Shall I run him through?” he asked and tipped her chin up. As their eyes met, Taffeta knew that although he was trying to make her smile, he would defend her honor. She could see it in his face. He was ready and able to do battle.

“No ... no ... it was nothing,” she repeated. She couldn’t have a scene, and Tarrant looked as though he was ready to stomp over to Bruton and lay him low. Taffy’s heart pumped furiously, spelling out his name, his size, his magic touch, but he wasn’t letting go of the issue.

“It was something, obviously,” he answered on a frown.

“He said I was worthy to be his wife.” She seethed as she repeated the words. “He is a very bad man, and he thinks I am worthy his badness!”

Tarrant stared at her for a long moment before mirth exploded from his lips, and then he began laughing uproariously and turning heads. She watched as he finally got control, realizing how absurd she had sounded.

He took her chin, heedless of tongues ready to wag. “Taffeta,” he said, his voice low and filled with pleasure, “you are a wonder. My complete wonder.” He put her hand through his arm. “Come, let us get some refreshments and take them into the garden.”

“Yes, and then, my lord, you may tell me where you have been,” she said with what she hoped was a flirtatious look.

“Did you miss me?” he asked, his eyes bright as he waited for her answer.

“I noticed you were not about,” she answered, giving him a little, only a little.

“I am glad of it, sunbeam. There are big guns about to go after the Luddites and squash them if they can, and the Rogues Three are wanted for treason and murder.”

Her eyes opened wide. "Treason and murder? But that is absurd."

"Precisely and yet, as I said—big guns and squashing. I am looking into the matter, for whoever is behind the London three posing as the *Nottingham Three* needs to be stopped. They are traitors."

"Indeed. We can help."

"You and yours had better stay well away from it. Leave it to me."

She considered this for a moment. "Hmm, you may be right. I shan't even say anything about it to Seth and Nigel."

"Good girl," pronounced Tarrant, smiling at her warmly.

"Why were you absent from the meeting about the death penalty for the Luddites?"

"It was a lost cause. Defeating it—just impossible now."

Instead of taking her into the dining room, he had led her outdoors without stopping for refreshments, and she was vaguely aware he'd stopped their little stroll where they were well hidden by a row of evergreens. No one from the ballroom's French doors would be able to see them. She turned to say breathlessly, "You said you would feed me?"

"Did I?" His voice was low. "Will this do?"

She heard the husky desire in his voice and the hard determination. She found herself wrapped in his strong embrace with his mouth covering hers, devouring ... tasting ... taking ... infusing her with an undercurrent of mounting need. Her longing met and matched his as his tongue lapped at hers and seemed to drink and taste with an unquenchable thirst.

Taffeta's response was primal; she pressed her yearning body into his, and suddenly it was like an internal explosion between them that instead of blasting them apart drew and melded them together.

She clung to him, holding on and wishing he would never let her go. She wished he would take her away, take her completely, and make her his own. She returned the fervor of his embrace with a passion that swept away all logical thought.

He handled her deftly as his fingers explored her and turned her into an unabashed, wanton creature. Her heart reverberated with a riotous flurry of sensations, and she never wanted this time with him to end. He lifted up all the wildness in her and gave it release. She wanted him to take her and hide her away from the world, somewhere private where she could explore their mutual needs. She wanted to feel him, all of him.

He broke away and whispered, "Taffeta."

When he said her name, it was like an enchanted melody that made her raise up for another kiss.

He chuckled her under the chin and said, "Beauty, you beauty—would that I could call in the debt now, right now. But I had better get you back indoors before your brother calls me out."

Slap—a splash of cold water. They were in the garden! Of course he had to take her back, and yet she reeled from the sudden rejection. He so easily

could put her aside? He so easily could resist her? Was she so undesirable he could take his kiss and part from her while she was still floating in the wind?

She had expected words of love and devotion, of undying need and passion. What she got was totally unexpected. Cold, calculated logic. He was the rakehell Hotspur and didn't seem even mildly ready to take her to bed.

He should be making assignations with her. He should want to meet and make love to her. She still quivered from his touch, and a sure hurt replaced desire. She felt her protective shields rush around her to encase her as she answered. "Indeed, and my brother should call you out—fie, my lord, seducing a maid in the garden!" She attempted to make light of their encounter with a tease in her tone. She started to turn and walk away, but he grabbed her arm and frowned at her.

"What are you talking about? *Certes*, woman—"

She cut him off. "Call in your marker, my lord, so I can get it over with and forget all about you, for this is torture—waiting, forever waiting ..." A catch in her throat made the words sound jerky, and she breathed in air trying to stop the tears that threatened. She could do only one thing at that moment. She needed to save face and run. She yanked hard out of his hold and rushed toward the garden doors. Slipping back into the ballroom, she found Catherine and hugged her fiercely. "Cathy, some men are beasts, beasts I tell you, and oh, *do not let me cry*."

"Cry? Nonsense. I don't know which of them has upset you, but put up your chin and make him see what he is losing. There is naught like to you, my sweet Taffy," said her friend, who took her hand and firmly led her to the dining room. "Cake is the answer at the moment. We must have cake, all kinds of cake, and then we will dance with many and forget the one."

Taffeta squeezed her hand and looked at her. "Love you, Cath. Yes, we will eat cake, chocolate cake, and we will dance with many." She eyed her for a moment and then said, "And then you will come home with me tonight, and we shall talk, you and I, just like we did when we were in school, and you will tell me why Bruton worries you so."

Catherine smiled and then sighed. "Yes, I suppose you will hound me until I do, but I won't until you tell me which man was a beast to you tonight and why."

"Deal," Taffeta said as she watched the Hotspur take his leave of his hostess and depart the ball. This brought back the flood of hurt and tears that threatened to engulf her, but Taffy was made of sterner stuff. Instead, she vowed to put the rakehell Hotspur out of her mind with chocolate, lots of chocolate!

* * *

Catherine Frome's father, Sir Miles, sat back heavily in his coach to contemplate the fates, well satisfied his daughter was safely on her way with Lady Taffeta. Otherwise he would have had to send her home alone from

Lady Darthborn's ball if he wished to keep her safely out of what they were sure was about to occur.

Sidmouth and he had come up with a plan earlier that day and set it about he would be carrying home a 'packet' from Lord Darthborn meant for Wellington. What they needed was to flush out the traitor, so they had allowed the person Tarrant believed was their 'leak' to overhear their plan.

Frome had instructed his driver to take the route that would lead them out of the city toward Dover. He needed to make it appear as though he was indeed quietly delivering important documents to waiting hands at the coast.

He told himself this was all absurd—he was more than fifty years old, and a man his age should not be engaging in such dangerous pastimes. But this was for country—for his beloved Albion!

The Rogues Three had to be flushed out, Miles thought, and then something caught his attention. A quick glance out the side window revealed darkly clad riders emerging from an alley, and he had no doubt what they would do next.

Miles Frome heard the sound of horses' shoes on cobblestone and knew they were getting closer. They had just passed an arched opening to an alleyway near the wharf overlooking the Thames. He had told his driver to take a dimly lit shortcut, something he normally would not have done. And then, just as he had expected, he felt the coach lurch.

He heard one of the men on horseback grunt out a gruff sound. "This time, there will be no sport in it. I want that understood."

Sidmouth frowned. Somehow, even disguised, that voice sounded familiar. Evidently, though he was the leader, he was still giving last-minute instructions.

"Aye, Flash, we knows whot ye want," said the another man.

Sir Miles waited as they came to the door of his coach waving their horse pistols and threatening his driver with "Stand and deliver!"

* * *

Lady Taffeta poured hot water from her silver ewer into her washbasin, sighed, and continued to jibber jabber at her friend as she washed her face. She had dismissed her maid, telling her to get some rest and that she and Miss Frome would see to themselves.

Catherine laughed and cried out, "*Enough!* Stop hounding me, you miserable wretch who must know all."

She had already washed and changed into one of Taffy's pretty white nightdresses and was curled up on the settee with a shawl wrapped around her.

"Well, you can save yourself a great deal of trouble by just telling me what the devil Bruton did to make you so uncomfortable in his presence."

"First, you tell me what is toward with you and the gentleman you called a 'beast'," Cathy replied knowingly.

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Odious thing, you are forever in my business—like tonight when you pushed me into Lord Fenmore so that he must ask me to waltz." Cathy sighed. "And we both know it is you he wants."

"Idiot. Complete and total idiot—me? Nonsense, stupid girl. Anyone with eyes in their head can see he is mad about you."

"But he is always talking *to you!*"

"Yes, to ask me how he should go about catching your interest," Taffy said and burst out laughing. "My dearest friend is a moron."

Catherine flung a nearby pillow at her friend's head. "I won't have you matchmaking for me."

"Stuff and nonsense. I did very well by you in Southwell when we were at school, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was different—that was just fun and games and growing up."

"So tell me about Bruton," Taffeta demanded, getting serious and coming to sit near her on the settee.

"Naught to tell," Miss Frome replied quietly.

"Rumor has it he is a complete and utter devil with young ladies." Taffy really would not give up.

"Is he?"

"Yes, although I think he is so much fun." Taffy tried a new tactic.

Catherine grabbed her hand. "No—do not let him bamboozle you, Taffy." She sighed heavily and lowered her head. "Did you never wonder why I was sent home from my first season in such disgrace?"

"Disgrace? I never heard anything about disgrace—I just thought you went home because of something to do with your aunt," Taffy said in shocked accents. "In fact, I remember now, your letter said your aunt was tired of playing hostess."

"It was a lie, and I thought a feeble one at the time, but it seems Papa did such a good job of scotching the gossip it was not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Gossip? *You?*" Taffy shook her head. "I don't believe my quiet, serious-minded, good girl Cathy could give anyone fodder for gossip."

"You see I ... Bruton ..." Catherine stumbled on the words.

"Oh no, never say you fell in love with the devil and thought yourself lovesick and went into a decline?"

"You are a wretch for putting it that way, but I suppose, yes, to some extent that is what happened, and I let him kiss me, and, Taffy, I let him ... touch me."

"Bed you? Did he bed you?" Taffy stood up. "I will run him through myself if he bed you and hurt you!"

She pulled on Taffy's hand and made her sit again. "No, not quite but nearly. I was so very infatuated and thought, stupidly, he wanted to marry me,

but all he really wanted was to add another virgin to his collection.”

“I *shall* run him through—he is a criminal,” Taffy said, temper flaring, eyes narrowing.

“Papa caught us—that day when I nearly lost myself to him. Oh, Taff. Papa walked in on us, and Bruton told him he had no intention of marrying such a girl as I. Can you imagine my mortification? And there was poor, dear Papa, and he threw a punch at Bruton, and it was awful ... and then Bruton started the gossip. We don’t know for sure it was him who started it, but he was the only one who could have known anything about the incident. I can’t bear to look at him, and when I do, I am reminded what a complete fool I was.”

“Never you mind. You were not a fool—he was a cad, Cath, and he took advantage of you. Do not blame yourself for his unprincipled behavior. There is an old saying about what you do to others coming back around to you, and it has great meaning.” She went very thoughtful for a moment and then with determination in her voice said, “Your dowry would never do for him, but you see, *mine would*. He is very interested in my dowry.”

“Taffeta, what are you planning in that mad mind of yours?”

“Bruton thinks naught of seducing virgins and leaving them to fend for themselves. Well, it is time I made good on that old saying and bring things around neatly and dump them in his lap. I have heard talk about his debts. He must be desperate for immediate funds. I mean to open his eyes to the money that would be at his disposal if I were to agree to marry him.”

“Taffy, Oh no, Taffy. Just stay away from him.”

“No, I mean to bring the blackguard low. I mean for him to center his efforts on one, just one, *me*, and then I mean to blow his chances sky high!” Taffeta hugged her friend fiercely. “He is a bad man—to the heart, *bad*—and deserves what I have planned for his future. Cath, he has to be stopped.”

* * *

Sir Miles made something of a show as he flung the brown wrapped packet behind him on the coach seat and stepped out of his conveyance to glare defiantly at the three darkly clad hightoby riders.

His steely brows drew together. Their voices were muffled, and although he couldn’t quite recognize any, one seemed to stand out.

“What did you throw back in the carriage? Never mind—get it and hand it over,” said the tall toby, whose voice sounded somehow refined in spite of the low, hoarse tone he used.

“It was naught,” he answered evasively.

“Get it now!” the tall one who appeared to be in charge rasped threateningly as he waved a gun at him.

He did as he was ordered but attempted to delay, arguing, “Take whatever belongings I have—but not this packet.” He held it to his heart, hoping he was not being too dramatic.

The tall toby rider grabbed it from him and put it in his saddle's satchel.

"But for your country's sake," pleaded Sir Miles, "leave me the packet." The packet contained just enough information to make it look authentic and to trap the villains later.

"Country, is it?" asked the smallest of the highwaymen. He turned to the man in charge and said, "Whot is this? We don't need to be taking—"

"Shut your stupid mouth and get on your horse," growled the man in charge in a voice that once more made Frome hear something familiar in it.

A few moments later, as he watched them ride off into the darkness, he answered his driver's harangue of questions. "No, we will not set up a call for the Watch. Let's head for Lord Sidmouth's establishment immediately."

~ Nine ~

Two days later

TARRANT SAT UP in bed and held his head against the morning's light. *Damnation*, but what had he done to himself last evening? After the Darthborn ball, he had sworn to himself he would steer clear of Lady Taffeta. However, he wasn't able to stop himself, and off he went last evening to yet another ball she was bound to be attending. All he knew was he had a physical need to see her, a heart-wrenching desire to touch her, and *bloody hell*—there she was right before his very eyes, and what the bloody hell was she doing? Flirting outrageously with Bruton—that's what he found, and it drove him to the brink of madness.

The pair had made a great show of liking one another. They laughed and teased, and she batted her thick lashes at Bruton, and he didn't know who he wanted to rant at more. *Hell and brimstone*, why hadn't her brother, her uncle, her aunt—why hadn't any of them stopped her from her audacious display?

Bruton had actually taken her on the floor to waltz three times! Even he would not do such a thing. Everyone had remarked upon it. He had watched them from his corner, and his ominous mood had brought him to the brink of losing control. When he noticed his friend Fenmore leaning into Miss Frome, he stormed to their side, if nothing more than to discover what the little Taffeta's game was.

"What is she doing, Catherine?" Fenmore frowned as he watched Lady Taffeta making eyes at Bruton.

"Do not worry about my Taffy. She knows full well what she is doing. There is only one person who will get hurt in her little show, and it won't be her."

"Really?" Tarrant remarked as he overheard this. "And why is that?"

Catherine Frome blushed and quietly answered, "Because she knows what she is doing. Always does."

"Not this time," Fenmore retorted. "She will have all the gossipmongers chattering about her if she doesn't bring it down a notch."

"No, I don't think so. She is sister to the Duke of Grantham and wealthy enough to gain her a great deal of leeway," Tarrant answered. "But what *is* her game?"

"Oh, I am hungry. James?" Catherine said, obviously trying to change the

subject.

He jumped to offer his arm. "Shall I take you to the dining room, then?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "I would be so very grateful."

James Fenmore turned to Tarrant. "Do you join us?"

Tarrant laughed. "No, I wouldn't dream of it." It was obvious his friend had received his *coup de gras* and that the lady returned his 'feelings'. He was happy for him but miserable for himself. He couldn't come to grips with what he was feeling for Lady Taffeta—didn't want to face it and damn well didn't like seeing her with Bruton for many reasons, but one reason headed the list: downright possessive jealousy! Him—jealous? He had thought he would never experience an all-absorbing emotion in regards to a woman, ever again.

The feel of Taffeta's sweet lips pressed against his as he'd parted them jarred his mind, and the memory was vivid. He could almost taste her once more as he had when his tongue had lapped against hers. *Certes*, what a perfect, delicious promise of passion she was! What a contradiction of everything he believed was so. What a desirable, quixotic beauty. What wonderful, laughing eyes.

She had his head spinning, seemingly attracted to him one moment and then flirting with Bruton the next. Just what was she doing? He had left the soiree early and had gone to a favorite tavern, where he had met some of his cronies and had drunk more than he usually did. Now he had an aching head and, if he admitted it to himself, a heart that did not feel much better.

The next thing he knew, he was on the street hailing a hackney and directing it to Lady Marble's townhouse, where he was sure to find Taffy at home at such an early hour.

He was met by Jarvis at the door but was told Lady Marble had gone off for the entire day with friends. He frowned and then asked, "Perhaps Lady Taffeta is at home?" He shouldn't be calling on her when she was unchaperoned, but *damn*, the thought of getting her alone excited him!

As Jarvis began to lead him forward, he called him off. "I know the way and shall show myself in." He ignored the mild objection Jarvis tried to stop him with and hurried to the morning room.

He opened the door and stood transfixed a moment as he contemplated Lady Taffeta's profile in the sunlight. Ravishing! From the top of the blue confection of ribbons threaded through her yellow hair to the toe of her blue slipper, just peeping out under her gown.

She turned halfway, and he found her gray eyes filled with laughter as she held Valiant out to him and declared, "Here, Valiant, your hero, here to see what progress you have made." So saying she shoved the black and white puppy into his hands.

He was indeed pleased to see the puppy was thriving. He petted Valiant a moment before putting him down and watching him make his way back to Taffy. She bent, picked him up, and took him to a cushion, where she placed him lovingly. She then turned to Tarrant and said brightly, "Well, and good

morning to you, my lord.”

He went forward, took her hands, and said softly, “Sunbeam, you slay me with your beauty—and with the cold shoulder you gave me last night. You had eyes only for Bruton.”

She laughed. “Did you think so? Then I have played my part well.”

He frowned. “What game are you at now?”

“Ah, you must wait and see.”

“No, I must not. I know you think me a scoundrel, but forget that for the moment, sunbeam. That one, Bruton *truly is*.”

“Oh, I have no doubt of that ... *and as to you?* I am not sure what you are yet. I wish you were perhaps more of a scoundrel ...” She glided up to him, and it was more than he could take. He pulled her into his arms, and as he kissed her, they seemed to move in unison, in a flurry of emotion that leapt from him to her and back to him again. He couldn’t stop, didn’t want to stop as emotions, lust, and fully charged need took over.

* * *

He is the one. Her heart had been telling her this for some time. She had known beyond any doubt for some days. When she turned a few moments ago and saw him standing there, she knew she couldn’t let him leave without making a push to show him how she felt. He had to feel it too. She sensed it, wanted—hoped—it was so.

He took her into his arms, and she knew, absolutely, they had to bring this to its completion. This morning would do, as her aunt was gone for the day, and her brother and uncle were in Parliament. She was free to explore what she was feeling, and what she was feeling was savage desire.

His ardent kisses took her to another world. His touch made her forget all else. His voice in her ear thrilled her senses. She realized she wanted him with a stormy desire that took hold of her and made her travel through *must not* into *must!*

Letting her go, he threw off his coat. He went to the door and, after locking it, returned to her. Taking her hand to his lips, he said, “You are driving me mad, Taffy.” Then he showed her just what that meant. He was feral, his eyes dark with hunger as he tore at her clothes, whispering words of need and how he reveled at the silky softness of her skin ... and oh, she wanted him.

She couldn’t speak; she only reacted, and she wasn’t sure just how her clothes ended up in a pile around her naked body.

What was she doing? She was in her aunt’s house and, oh, but it felt so right. She was breaking the rules; she was always breaking all the rules—but this broken rule, *this one might end in breaking her heart.*

But she didn’t want to stop. She wanted the feeling to go on ... and ... his mouth was on hers again as he lowered her to his greatcoat spread out on the Oriental rug along with her discarded gown. How had he thought to do that?

Had he done this before? Of course he had done this before—she was the only fool in the room ...

His hands manipulated her breasts, his head bent, and the next thing she knew, his tongue licked at her nipples as he pulled her hands over her head and took control. She squirmed with the intensity of the sensations he aroused in her, and she gasped with pleasure as his fingers found and manipulated the crease between her legs.

He took one nipple between his forefinger and thumb, bent to lick it, and then teased it with friction. He licked his palm and rubbed it over her pink pertness till she arched her back with need. She knew she wanted something more, and she threw her head back and said, “Tarrant ...”

“Yes, love ... ah, you are wet, so wet and ready,” he whispered as his fingers traveled into her canal and pleased her to the point of distraction.

“Deeper ... push your finger deeper ...”

“Yes, love ...” He did, even as a feral sound came from his throat, and he explored her with skill and deftness.

She opened her eyes as he released his rock-hard cock and watched it dance. It occurred to her he was stallion-sized, and she gasped with sudden fear, “Oh ... no ...”

He chuckled, but his voice was hoarse with hunger. “Oh, yes, sweetness, you are so ready for this ...”

She stared and realized she wanted to touch. She reached for his shaft, ran her hand along its length, closed her fingers around it, and whispered, “I ... Oh my ...”

“We’ll make it fit, steady now ... not yet ...” He bent and pushed her back down as he lifted her butt and got into position to lap the sweet moisture from her canal.

She began to pump and grind against his tongue, moving instinctively as her body seemed to know what to do, and when he nibbled at the nub just inside, she arched up toward him and released a short, wild sound just before she climaxed. She shuddered with pleasure, was still trembling with the aftermath as he rubbed his cock against her clit and then positioned it at the wet opening.

“There, woman ... want that ... want more ...?” His voice was hard and rough with the intensity of his desire.

“Yes, yes ...” she answered. She would make this big, beautiful man hers—take everything he had to give and return the prize in full. And she knew something else. She loved him with all her heart, and she hoped if he didn’t love her yet, he would very soon.

“Ah,” she uttered breathlessly, “*Now*, Tarrant ...”

“Say my name,” he whispered as he continued to tease her with his pulsating cock.

“Tarrant ...”

“*No!* My name. Say it.”

“Thurston ...” she growled at him and then suddenly pulled away from him and got onto her knees. She looked first into his hungry, startled eyes and said, so that he could not mistake her meaning, “I want this, Thurston—I want you.” She bent to stroke his shaft with her delicate fingers, dropped a kiss on its head, licked its length, and stroked it lovingly.

He uttered a primal sound and grabbed her hair as she kissed and stroked his hard, throbbing dick. Then he lowered her onto her back once more, spread her legs, and asked her roughly, “Want it? Want it now inside you?”

“Yes, please ... do ... do want it now!” she answered, and she looked into his dark eyes as he tenderly started his journey. Then he suddenly paused mid-movement.

“Taffeta ... I ...”

“What? Why do you stop?” She squirmed under him and knew the answer to her question. She could see it on his face. He was momentarily taken aback, and Taffeta was no fool. He hadn’t expected her to be a virgin. She smiled to herself and was not at all insulted. *She had not behaved like one.*

She was ready; oh, she knew she was ready.

“I ... I had thought ...”

“You didn’t know I was a virgin,” she told him playfully.

“I ... Oh, precious girl ... this will hurt at first.”

She wiggled toward him, trying to drive him in deeper, and said huskily, “Then get it over with quickly, my lord.” It was too late now for regrets, and Taffy did not believe in regrets. This was the man of her choice, and she had made her decision—so be it.

He smiled. “There is no other like you—there never will be.” He dove through her virginity and whispered, “Ah, sweet girl ... a first for both of us ...”

He had never taken a virgin before! *Score one for me*, she thought with great pleasure. That had to mean something, because she rather thought she knew the Hotspur, and he would not have taken her had he not cared ...

She felt a moment’s tearing and a pain shoot through her, and she cringed as he first entered. Then he stroked her face and kissed her, saying her name before he pushed deeper. All she knew was that she wanted him, all of him, like this.

She groaned with the ecstasy flooding through her, and as his cock lapped and teased and found her pleasure point, and she moaned his name. He built her desire to a frenzy, and she had a moment when she thought she might have to scream.

His finger joined his cock at the moisture-filled cleft and vibrated her pleasure point until she climaxed and shuddered uncontrollably once again. She grabbed for his hands, wanting to touch him in her aftermath of pleasure, a pleasure she had not believed existed. Holding him with the tips of her fingers, she lay back once again and watched him as he positioned himself.

And then there was no time for thought as sensation took over. He rocked her body, and she matched his movements, with her instincts guiding her. She pushed against him as he pumped into her. She ground into him as he rammed her. He took his cock out and played at her opening, and she begged him to put it back in, and he did, and she gave herself to his ministrations with wild abandon.

She bumped and pumped and climaxed again as he rocked inside her, and then all at once he stopped himself, picked her up, and turned her over to set her on her hands and knees—grinning all the while as he whispered, “Quick intro lesson, love ...” Then he rammed into her from behind, holding her breasts, flicking her nipples, and all she knew was she never wanted him to stop.

When he went off, he grabbed her breasts and held her as he pulsed inside her, and she realized the amount of control he was using to keep himself from shouting out.

Rolling with her tightly in his arms, he whispered, “You are a fit for me ...” He nibbled at her ear. “Taffeta, precious little woman, I don’t want to let you go ...” He kissed her tenderly at her neck and whispered her name over and over, and then suddenly he was all quick efficiency. “Hurry, love—you *must get dressed*. Too much time has gone by. I don’t want anyone to know how long I have been here alone with you ...”

“Doesn’t the Hotspur want another notch for his belt?” she asked on a half tease.

He frowned darkly. “What do you think of me?”

She was already pulling her clothes on, watching him throw on his. “I don’t know—*what do you think of me?*”

He grabbed her then and kissed her long and hard, and with his clothes still a bit askew, threw on his greatcoat, buttoned it up tightly, and said, “Make a bit of a fuss with your butler after I have left. Ask him if he knows when I left. Taffy, I won’t have you gossiped about, understand?”

She peeped at him. “Aye, aye, my lord.”

“Taffy!”

“Yes, yes—right then, be comfortable about it.”

She watched him leave as she finished patting her hair in place. She ran into the hall and rushed up to the small window overlooking the street, to watch him as he walked down the avenue. He hailed a cab, and then she turned and rang for Jarvis.

The butler appeared, and she asked, “Jarvis, did his lordship say when he would be back?”

“Oh no, my lady. He said he would show himself in ... and *I am* sorry, I never heard him leave.”

“Oh, very well then, thank you.” She smiled to herself as she hurried upstairs to wash and change and think of the rakehell Hotspur in the privacy of her bedroom.

~ Ten ~

LORD TARRANT RETURNED home to find a note from Sidmouth that required his immediate attention. His services were needed, and time was creeping up with none available to lose. He hurriedly jotted down a note for Taffeta.

Dearest little love,

Business has called me away for a few days, but know this. I shall miss you with all my heart and await the moment I can be with you again.

Miss me.

Yours,

Thurston

He put the sealed note into a lackey's hand and sent it off, comfortable in the belief she would smile when she read it, comfortable he would return and officially make her his own.

In the meantime, he scarcely had time to throw water on himself, change his clothes, toss some clothing in a portmanteau, and call for his coach. Documents in his possession now had to be delivered as planned.

As he left the city, his thoughts were not on Wellington, Napoleon, or the fate of his beloved Albion, but of his wild, unprincipled, unruly, completely mischievous, and precious love, Taffeta. He adored her with every beat of his heart and wanted her just as she was.

He had not been certain she was a virgin, because she was so unreserved, so passionate, so willing ... But *egad*, when he found she was, his heart swelled with absurd pride and a sudden desire to scoop her up, take her home, and declare to the world she was his woman—*his*. It had nearly overtaken his good sense.

Well, that was something he was going to do very shortly, and as soon as he got back. And he didn't want a long engagement either. He wanted her in his bed, in his house—running his life with her smiles and her laughter and her wildness ... *Damn*, but he loved her.

He had not told her yet. Wait—she had not told him.

She must love him. He couldn't bear it if she didn't love him. She did—*she must*. She could not have given herself with such abandon had she not—

could she?

Hell and damnation! He could not get back to her soon enough.

* * *

Lord Bruton was met at the door by Jarvis and told Lady Taffeta was abovestairs.

"I'll wait," he said.

"She asked not to be interrupted," Jarvis said with a frown.

"And still, I will wait. Perhaps you can slip my card under her door and tell her I am here to take her for a ride through the park if she would like."

Jarvis sighed and started for the stairs. Bruton looked at the silver salver on the center round table and saw there Lord Tarrant's seal on a note addressed to Lady Taffeta.

As soon as Jarvis was out of view, Bruton snatched it up and immediately slipped it into his pocket. At his back and just at that moment, the door opened to admit both Nigel and the lady's brother.

They saw him and stopped short. He couldn't know if they had seen him take the note from the salver. He assumed not, for they were just the types to challenge him for it.

The young duke said curtly, "Bruton, my aunt is away, and my sister is not receiving male visitors in her absence."

Bruton nodded and said aloofly, "Of course. I merely thought to take Lady Taffeta out for a ride in Hyde Park."

"She can't go. She is promised to us for the day."

He inclined his head and left them at his back, much irritated with the manner in which they'd received him. *Who the devil did they think they were?*

This was going to be difficult if her brother did not approve the match, although he rather thought Lady Taffeta had a mind of her own.

He was hardly able to wait until he was safely within his coach before he opened the sealed note to read Tarrant's note and smirk to himself. Well, well ... So the Hotspur had received his *coup de gras*. How very amusing it would be to steal the lady out from under his grasp.

* * *

"Come on," her brother said as he dragged her down the stairs. "We are taking you to lunch. We have something of a problem and don't want the servants hearing bits and pieces."

"What—won't the waiters hear us?"

"Not at Wilkes Coffee House—we'll take a private booth. You'll like it, and it will get you out. You'll like that too."

Taffy sighed. She had been happily lying on her bed, dreaming of Tarrant and looking forward to the little soiree that evening where she was sure she would see him again. However, her brother and uncle seemed very anxious

for her company, and so she went along willingly enough.

Nigel looked at her as he helped her into the waiting hackney and remarked, "You are looking very well, Taffy."

"Thank you, Nigel. I feel ... very well," she answered with an impish smile. She settled on her seat, spreading the skirt of her blue velvet cloak about herself.

"Taffy, have you had ... any premonitions lately?" Her brother got right to the point.

She blushed as she thought of the one that had just been fulfilled and answered hesitantly, "Nooo ..."

"Well, we need to talk, because something ugly has occurred."

And then, without warning, it happened, and it was so different than her other visions. This time, it was as though a strong, giant hand had reached over and scooped her up. She sat in the giant's palm and watched totally detached from the scene unfolding before her eyes. It was in the dark of night, and she saw herself being dragged from her carriage. Why was she alone in a carriage? Ah, she wasn't alone; Catherine was with her. Two men were holding guns to the driver, and Catherine was clutching her hand.

They were clothed in gowns—going somewhere—but unescorted. Why? Why were they unescorted? That was all wrong.

The men were in black low hoods and masks, and the tall one yanked her away from Catherine and pulled her toward his horse. Something about him, about his scent, was familiar.

His voice was low and raspy, and he snapped at her, "Don't worry—I mean to make it right, and by morning, you will be my wife."

And she realized. "Bruton ..." she whispered. It all made sense now.

Just as suddenly as the vision had arrived, it was gone.

"No, Seth ... it can't—I won't let it happen ..."

"What, Taffy? What did you see? And do let go of my arm—you are pinching me to death."

"Oh, sorry," she said as she released him and took a long drag of air. "I saw someone dressed like ..." She lowered her voice. "... the way we dress when we are the three ... pretending to be the Rogues Three, and he said he was going to marry me, against my will, and I tell you, Seth, I won't let it happen."

"Don't you worry, Sis. We won't let it happen. Where were you? We will take care not to let you travel that road."

"I was alone with Catherine. We were in a carriage ... going somewhere together ... just on the outskirts of London, and, Seth—it was Bruton."

Seth released a long, low whistle and turned to eye Nigel. "Damned impudent scoundrel."

"Well, we have his measure, and we won't let this happen, Taff—mark me," her uncle said with some determination.

"I wonder ...?" said Seth.

“You wonder about what?” Taffy asked.

“Whether Bruton, dressed like he was in your vision, has anything to do with what we have just discovered.”

“What have you just discovered?”

Their hack had arrived outside the entrance to the coffee house, so conversation was suspended until they had left it behind and were seated in a quiet corner of the busy establishment.

With their heads together, Nigel said with a frown, “I shall get right to the point. Three blackguards have been disguising themselves as the Rogues Three and stealing secrets from the crown—delivering them to the frogs,” he said under his breath.

“I know about the imposters. Tarrant told me,” said Taffy. “It was supposed to be a secret.”

“And you didn’t tell us?” Seth was shocked to ask.

“I was going to, just haven’t had a chance, but go on, go on,” she urged.

“It makes no sense why they should ape the Rogues Three, though perhaps it amuses them to also work against the Luddite movement—put the blame at their door, make everyone think they are traitors as well as thieves.” Seth visibly seethed.

“This is awful. We must do something,” cried Taffeta.

“Yes, but what?” Seth brightened. “Do you think you could conjure up a vision—see who it is?”

“It doesn’t work that way. You know that.” Taffy sighed.

“Work on it, and it might.”

Taffy glared at him before taking a long sip of her coffee and then a bite of her cake. She stared across the room. Her mouth opened and closed as she watched the fashionable man making his way toward them. *Bruton*.

He was a devil. How now could she bring him low without putting herself in the line of fire? She couldn’t. She *was* the line of fire.

Her vision had put a new take on just how much of a blackguard he was, and she was going to have to devise a new plan.

Bruton arrived at their table, where he bent low over her fingers, ignored her brother and uncle in his usual aloof fashion, and looked only at her. Taffy managed a smile. Was he already planning to abduct her, or would it enter his head at some later date? If only her vision had given her a clue as to timing.

He took up a nearby chair and lifted it to set it in place at their table before he made a flourish of sitting beside Taffeta.

Nigel objected. “I say! *We are having a private—*”

“I shan’t stay long.” Bruton interrupted as he turned to her. “Shall I see you at Lady White’s soirée tonight?”

“Oh, why yes,” she answered, all at once wishing she wasn’t attending.

“And will you wear my posy?”

“Your posy? I have not received your posy,” she answered truthfully.

“You shall, later this afternoon,” he answered.

“Oh ... I am sorry, I have already agreed to carry another’s posy,” she answered brightly.

“Really? Who holds that honor?”

“*I do*,” said a strong, hard voice at Bruton’s back.

Taffeta looked up with adoration and relief in her eyes. She found dark, bright eyes looking back soothingly into hers. He spoke to her with those dark, sensual eyes, and she felt her heart beat faster.

It was as though his voice whispered in her ear, telling her he would always be there for her, would always protect her, and her emotions expanded and made her want to cry with happiness.

Bruton stood up at once. He nodded to Tarrant, bowed to Lady Taffeta, and said quietly, anger lining his words, “It appears I was behind in my attention. I shall not be again.” He turned on his heel and left them.

“Good show, Tarrant!” said Taffy’s brother, standing to slap the Hotspur on his shoulder. “Do sit ...”

Tarrant took up Bruton’s vacated chair and got right to the point. “I was on my way out of town, made a stop at the Home Office, and plans were changed. When I stopped by your aunt’s, Jarvis told me that you were all here.”

Taffeta felt the caress as his gaze traveled over her, and he asked her softly, “Did you get my note?”

“Note? No.”

“Aha!” said Seth. “*Devil!* I thought I saw him slipping something into his pocket.” He shook his head. “Looks like Bruton got hold of it. *Devil!* The very idea—stealing people’s private missives!”

Tarrant didn’t answer this directly, but his voice was low and hard when he said, “I will have to cut out his heart and feed it to him in pieces.”

“Yes, you must.” And then her pretty features softened once more as she asked Tarrant, “You sent me a note?” Before he could answer, she turned on her brother. “*Faith*—Bruton was at the house? You didn’t tell me, Seth, and he stole a note meant for me? This is outrageous.” She turned back to Tarrant. “Yes, do cut out his heart—*if you can find it*.”

A moment’s silence fell over them as each considered the meaning of Bruton’s behavior. The silence was broken by Seth, who cleared his throat and said, “Better tell Tarrant now, sis. He is a right ’un, and he should know ...”

She wasn’t about to disclose the fact she had visions. She just wasn’t ready, so she glared at her brother and said, “Seth babbles like a woman. It is nothing. I have very strong instincts, and Bruton worries me, that is all.”

The Hotspur considered her for a moment but obviously didn’t mean to grill her about it as he said, “Then let us get to the point. Rogues Three must never ride again in Nottingham.”

“Right,” Nigel said.

“And their cloaks, masks—I can’t help but wonder where the three

rascals hid them,” Tarrant mused, looking meaningfully at them.

“Well, as to that ...” Seth coughed in his fist. “I would imagine they thought to keep the things as mementos, but wisdom overruled, and we believe the three must have burned their disguises.”

“Ah, they have more brains than I gave them credit for.” Tarrant grinned. “My next question is this. You know, I believe, we have a problem with imposters here in London, posing as the three and stealing documents meant for Wellington?”

“Villainous traitors!” Nigel declared.

“Just so,” said Tarrant. “We mean to set a trap for them, and I want you somewhere very public when we do—just as a safeguard.”

“No one knows ... I mean ... well ...” His voice trailed off.

Tarrant laughed and shook his head. “’Tis done, but we still wouldn’t want anyone making any connections and attempting any ... er ... blackmail.”

“Damn, no!” Nigel agreed.

“And one more thing. In the upcoming days and evenings, I expect you to help me keep an eye on Lady Taffeta, as I suspect if certain individuals are denied their goals, they may think to take by force what isn’t given willingly.” He looked at Taffeta and then at her male relatives. “You will have to make certain she does not enjoy the freedom she has grown accustomed to, clear?”

“Clear but ...” Seth started on a snort. “Easier said than done.”

“Nevertheless, I believe her well-being to be in immediate danger for several reasons, and if you can’t manage to keep her in check, I shall.”

Brother and uncle eyed one another and then Tarrant a bit skeptically.

Taffeta eyed them all and finally let go with her thoughts. “Now, hold on a moment, all of you. I am very capable of looking out for myself, and I will not be kept a prisoner because of a blackguard.” She eyed Tarrant defiantly. “I won’t be curbed by—”

“Do not test me, my love. You wouldn’t like it, not one bit.” Tarrant grinned wickedly at her, and her mouth opened, closed, and then opened again without anything coming out.

Seth beamed. “Aye then, Taffy, what say you?”

“I say, I know well enough how to watch my back, and so I shall—so should we all.”

~ Eleven ~

THE FOUR LEFT the coffeehouse, but their chattering continued. Taffy noted to herself how quiet and thoughtful Tarrant appeared. She was also aware that his fingers caressed her cloak as they stepped outdoors.

Nigel turned to Tarrant. “Do you come to m’ aunt’s with us, for there are a few questions I still have for you, Tarrant?”

“Aye, have one or two, m’self,” Seth said, looking his way.

Taffeta smiled at Tarrant and urged in hopeful accents, “Do come with us ...” Her voice was soft and cajoling because all she knew was she wanted his company forever. As she spoke, she stepped backward and did not realize she had stepped to the edge of the curbing. She lost her balance and windmilled her arms. This spooked a horse being walked by a lackey. Everything that happened flashed before her eyes. The skittish horse reared up and came down before she could jump out of the way, and its left hoof caught her soundly, freakishly just below her bosom.

The lackey yanked on the poor, spooked horse and pulled him to order with a sharp reproof, but the damage was already done. Taffy bent over in pain. As she attempted to straighten up, she squeaked out, “Lord, *flush hit* ...”

“Sunbeam ... my sweet love,” Tarrant cooed as he swept her up into his arms cradle-style. Then he turned to Seth, and demanded, “Hail a hackney at once!”

Her brother did so, leaving Nigel and Tarrant to care for her. Taffy saw Nigel’s expression as he shot a glance between her and Tarrant, and she knew from his face that he had come to some conclusion. She saw a slow smile curve his lips but was in too much pain to consider what he might be thinking.

Her brother had finally caught the attention of a hackney, and she thought she might faint as pain shot through her when Tarrant gently saw her situated in the carriage. He climbed in beside her, followed by Seth and Nigel.

A few moments later, they were home, and the rakehell Hotspur placed her in a reclining position on the sofa, where he solicitously looked after her.

At this point, she knew from the rolling eyes her brother and uncle were giving one another that she would be teased pitifully as soon as Tarrant departed.

“Be easy, my lord—it is naught,” Taffy assured the Hotspur as she tried to wipe off her brother’s wicked grin with a glare.

“I would feel better if you would let me tend the bruise,” he said, and it

appeared to her that he was not at all put off by the fact both her brother and her uncle were privy to this.

Taffy stared at him, warning in her expression, and he laughed out loud. "Think I care for the proprieties when you have been injured?"

"But I am perfectly fine, I do assure you," she replied, gritting her teeth, for she could see her brother's expression and knew as soon as Tarrant left, he and Nigel would quiz her relentlessly.

"I have been kicked a time or two, my dear, and know otherwise. You are very brave, and we shall leave it at that for now. I shall leave you to rest and hope you will be well enough to attend White's soiree tonight, where I will be looking for you—only you."

She felt herself blush and met his gaze. It was as though no one else existed, as though life revolved around the moments they were together. When had this happened to her? She had always been so independent—and now, now she needed so much more than herself. "Must you leave?" she asked on a soft note.

"If you wish me to stay, I shall, but I have one errand that must be discharged—soon."

"Then do go," she said softly. "Take care of it, for it must be important. My brother and Nigel will look after me."

He kissed her hand. "It is of the utmost importance. Nothing else could take me from you at this time."

Tarrant stood up from the sofa and turned. Seth went forward to shake his hand, and Nigel grinned idiotically as he extended his, all under Taffy's gaze. She put a hand to her forehead.

"Gentlemen, I trust you to look after our precious treasure and shall see you this evening." So saying, he strode out of the sitting room and was gone.

"I say!" said Nigel, staring hard at Taffy.

"Indeed, sister mine, you have some explaining to do!" Her brother grinned from ear to ear.

"Why—don't you approve?"

"Approve?" replied Nigel. "Damn if you aren't close to bagging the catch of the century!"

* * *

The door was flung open, and Taffy exclaimed, "Cathy!"

Catherine stopped short and gasped. "Oh—what is wrong? You are hurt ... how ... oh no, this is awful. Whatever has happened—what?" she demanded, coming forward to sit on the sofa with her. She shrugged off her bonnet and gloves and took Taffy's hand.

"It is nothing," Taffy said, waving it off with her free hand. "Got kicked by a horse. My fault—wasn't watching where I was going ... startled the brute."

"Oh Taffy! Poor dear—shall I take you upstairs and have a look at it?"

Catherine frowned with concern.

“No, not now. It is bound to be black and blue. That is what bruises do—turn black and blue and then heal. There is nothing to be done. Now, why did you explode in here as though the devil was on your heels?”

“Yes, Cath, you did do that, you know,” Seth agreed with a nod.

Nigel inclined his head, and both men pulled up their chairs closer to the sofa. Something definitely was toward, for Catherine’s excitement was almost a visible force.

She eyed them all and said, “You know the other night, when I stayed over here?”

“Yes,” said Taffy.

“Papa was attacked!”

“*What?*” shrieked her audience as a whole.

Miss Frome stood up, removed her spencer of maroon brocade, and sat with a thump. Taffy impatient urged her friend to proceed, waving her hand with a wince.

“Yes—*attacked*.”

“Go on, do, Cath,” Taffy encouraged.

“By highwaymen who called themselves very loudly, and made certain Papa heard them, the Rogues Three,” Cathy said as she gazed at her friends.

Silence reigned for a moment, and then Taffy found her voice. “How do you know this? Surely your papa did not tell you?”

“No, of course he did not. I ... knew something was wrong, and I listened in on his conversation when Sidmouth paid him an early visit this morning.”

Taffy snorted and laughed. “Cathy, you astound me. You eavesdropped? I am so very proud of you.”

“Yes,” she said, blushing, “but I had to. You see, Papa seemed ... odd, and I was worried about him.”

“What I should like to know is ... what do you know about the Rogues Three?” Nigel asked gravely.

Cathy’s hands folded and unfolded in her lap. “Why do you ask?”

“Catherine Frome, answer my uncle,” Taffy demanded, eyeing her quizzically. “Oh, my. You have guessed, haven’t you? Why, you cunning thing.”

“Only because I know you three quite well, and I know your views regarding the plight of the Luddites. I thought, perhaps you might support such a thing and then, well ... three ...” Her voice trailed off.

“Let us not say anything further.” Seth made a fist and coughed into it. “One never knows who may be about—servants and such.”

“Well, this attack on your father,” Taffeta said, “what could they have wanted?”

“To steal documents meant for Wellington, but the Home Office was aware and did in fact expect the brutes to attack. They had a plan, you see, and set a trap of sorts. I couldn’t quite hear everything—but I knew it wasn’t

the Rogues Three of Nottingham. Needed, however to ... er ... warn you of the situation."

"Yes, our rogues have retired, but it is a shame their name is being sullied like this," Seth said with a sigh.

"Who are these traitors, and why would they betray their country?" Taffy asked, not really expecting a reply.

"Money," answered Nigel. "It is always about money, which brings me to another subject. Stay away from Bruton, young lady. He is after you for one reason only."

Taffy laughed. "I *loathe* him."

"Do you?" Seth asked with surprise. "You could have fooled me, sis."

"I meant to fool *him*, so if I fooled you, I did my job, but as you say, I think I shall now turn him up cold. I'm weary of the sport." She saw her friend was blushing furiously and immediately said, "Now, what of your papa? Did he suffer any injury?"

"No, no, he is fine and apparently pleased."

"Good, so now tell me—what of Fenmore?"

Again, Cathy blushed, and Taffy giggled deliciously. "Ah ... also good."

"Here is the thing." Nigel looked penetratingly at Miss Frome. "Catherine, what does your father know about the Rogues Three? Does he believe they are one and the same as the ones who worked Sherwood Forest?"

"From what I overheard, they have their doubts, but they don't care really. They mean to set a trap for the fellows. I was interrupted when one of our servants came out of the dining room, and I couldn't very well allow her to see me listening at the door."

Taffy laughed. "No, and in fact, it amazes me you did so."

"Well, I knew something was wrong, and I was worried—although when I took to listening, I didn't realize it would have anything to do with you three."

Seth reached over and patted her on the arm, pronouncing, "You are a right 'un for all your frills and quiet, a right 'un, and if Fenmore doesn't propose to you, I think I will!"

She blushed and slapped at the young duke. "You will not, you horrid tease—now stop it." She turned toward Taffy, who moved on the sofa, found it brought her some discomfort, and winced again.

"Oh, Taff, what you need is a hot bath. Come along, let me take you upstairs, and we'll have hot water brought up."

Taffy sighed. "Yes, I think if I am to feel better by tonight, I must do something."

Nigel and Seth were silent before they regarded one another under Taffy's watchful gaze. "We need to find out a bit more ..." Nigel said.

"How?" answered Seth.

"Tarrant," they both answered at once and then grinned when Taffy shook her head.

The music was low and sweet. The night air was cool and inviting. Lady White's soiree buzzed with the inevitable squeeze, and Taffeta wore Tarrant's posy with delicious pride.

He had remembered, even though he had said he had serious matters that needed attention, to send round a posy for her with a note that said simply, "I am yours ... Thurston."

She felt as though she could walk on air, and then she was dancing on his arm. A cotillion, and then a waltz, and he seemed determined not to leave her side. She saw astonished dowagers looking their way and hiding behind their fans as they gossiped. She giggled to herself and then out loud. To Tarrant she said, "Well, you certainly are causing quite a bit of commotion."

"Am I? Well, as to that, there will be even more of one when they read the paper in a few days and see the banns have been posted."

"Banns?" Taffy looked straight up into his eyes.

"I have already received permission from your aunt and brother. It leaves only you to seal my fate," he answered quietly.

"Thurston Tarrant ... are you picking up the cap I said I wouldn't throw your way?" She scarcely got the words out.

"I am." He took her gloved fingers and held fast. "Shall I take you outdoors and get on one knee, sunbeam?"

"No—ask me here, ask me now!" she demanded, joy taking over her senses.

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and making me delirious all the rest of my days?"

"Oh, I can do that," she said and gave him a long, exquisite, and low bow.

He roared with laughter and then said, "Of all the ways I imagined you might accept my proposal, sweet life, I did not expect a bow!" He pulled her up and hugged her tenderly, remembering her injuries and heedless of the shocked glances of many.

Then, grabbing her hand, he led her to the musicians, whispered in the lead musician's ear, and slipped him a few coins.

A moment later, the man announced, "A waltz to celebrate the engagement of Lord Thurston Tarrant to the Lady Taffeta of Grantham."

A gasp went up, followed by a round of applause as friends and acquaintances alike began to surround them. The music began, and Tarrant led his future bride onto the floor.

Bruton's jaw dropped as he listened to the engagement announcement. He couldn't believe his ears. He knew Tarrant was interested in Lady Taffeta, but it had never occurred to him his rival would propose to her.

Damn the man's soul! Did he think he would get away with this? Well, he

wouldn't. Bruton would still snatch the prize out from under him. He frowned over his new problem. Why had Tarrant done this? Tarrant didn't need her money—he had a fortune of his own.

Bloody hell! Damn the little vixen for her betrayal. No doubt she had used him to get the Hotspur jealous and bring him to this point. Well, he would teach her a lesson. No one would use him and get away with it.

A situation like this could only be handled in one way in his mind. Scandal would definitely ensue, but what did he care for scandal, and it was no more than what she deserved for her perfidy. If Tarrant thought he could steal his gilded calf, the only way out of his debts, well, he was wrong.

One way or another, he would have Lady Taffeta for his wife and her money to stave off debtors' prison.

He was down to his last sou. He was a desperate man, and he knew it, knew what he had to do, and had no intention of hesitating. What he had in his favor was that no one knew just how very desperate he was.

He wouldn't be bested in this way. He had to work on his alternate plan, a plan he had in place because he had been afraid from the start he would have to elope with her because of her family. He had suspected her young duke of a brother would never agree to his suit and had hatched an alternative plan.

He smiled wickedly to himself as he stood and watched the couple in question go around the dance floor as though they were in heaven. *Heaven?* They would both soon know hell—for he meant to take them there. Tarrant for daring to blatantly best him, and the little beauty for daring to lead him on.

One way or another, Taffeta and her wealth were going to be his. He would have to execute his plan a bit sooner than he had thought, and he would have to be careful. It would all depend on the fluidity of his movements over the next few days. It would have to appear to Tarrant and Lady Taffeta he was quietly withdrawing his interest in her. And now, he would begin to show her and the world at large he had transferred his interest to ... He looked around and moved to take Melody Connors onto the dance floor. Yes, Melody would do very well ...

~ Twelve ~

Three nights later

“OH, BUT THAT was dull work,” exclaimed Taffeta as she led Catherine to the front steps of Lady Higgens’s townhouse. She looked around for her brother and Nigel, who were still in conversation with a friend some distance at their back.

Their coach had pulled up to the curbing, and the Higgens’s footman held out his gloved white hand to help the ladies up the steps and into their carriage. Taffy looked to her brother and waved for him to hurry. Then she followed Catherine into the coach, and they spread their skirts around them.

“Well, at least it was an early evening. I must admit to being a bit tired from all our gadding about.”

“Yes, and I would have rather spent the evening at home than listening to those dandies try and ape poetry. Ugh, ’tis no wonder Aunt Sissy stayed home. We should have as well.” Taffy sighed.

“Hmmm, especially when there was no chance of having your dear Tarrant in attendance on you.”

Taffeta sighed more heavily. “Yes, I admit nothing seems as much fun when he isn’t about.” She eyed Catherine knowingly. “You were bored as well, and I noticed Fenmore wasn’t present either,” she said meaningfully.

“I knew he wouldn’t be. He is off with your Tarrant,” answered Catherine with a soft smile.

“Is he? I didn’t know,” Taffeta said with a frown. “I wonder what they can be up to? Something deliciously exciting I am sure, and what must we endure but ...” When she turned to look for her brother and uncle, she saw that a young and dirty urchin of a boy had gained their attention. “How odd—I wonder what is toward?”

Even while she was still looking their way out the curbside window, the coach suddenly lurched forward. Her heart skipped a beat, and she froze for a fraction of a moment as her reasoning took the situation and put it into cohesive order. This was wrong—all too wrong.

Taffy took immediate action and knocked on the inside box to the driver’s back wall. “Thomas, what are you doing? Stop this instant and wait for my brother and uncle.”

No answer. She went forward, pulled open the box to the driver’s seat,

and saw some of the man's back. He was not dressed in his usual uniform but wore a dirty set of clothes, and his long, straggly hair, under a peaked cap, told her at once this was not their coachman. Not Thomas. What had happened to the man? *Oh*, she immediately thought, *I hope he was not badly hurt*. But she could not spare more worry for him now—she and Catherine were in trouble. This was her vision coming to life!

She sat back and said to Catherine, “Right, then—here we are alone with a villain at the horse's head. Cathy, when the carriage slows, as it will in the traffic up ahead, will you take my hand and jump out?”

“Yes, of course, but ... what is this?”

“There is no time to explain, but we have to get away before the driver turns down an alley or quiet street, where no doubt another coach is waiting.”

“Will he stop in traffic? Can we get out then and run?” Cathy asked, looking determined.

“He won’t stop the coach unless he must, I am certain, and we have the advantage because he doesn’t know we know what is afoot. He is already slowing ... just a bit more, so we don’t lose our balance when we jump out.” She squeezed her friend’s hand. “You can do this, Cath. I know you can. Remember a few years back when those Eton boys took us for a wagon ride and things got a bit out of hand? Remember?”

“Yes, we were glorious, weren’t we? You knocked one boy off the wagon, and the other two were busy holding up their team while we jumped off and vanished into the woods. Yes, that was glorious, and we laughed all the way back to school—stupid boys.”

“This is different. They were only playing a prank. This time, we are being abducted. We have no choice but to take it seriously and do what we must. Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then hold my hand and get ready,” Taffeta said, looking out the window and discovering a maze of traffic ahead. “He is already slowing, but I don’t think he will stop—are you ready?”

“Ready?”

“I shall open the door, and we must hike up our skirts and take to ground.”

“Go ahead—I am with you.”

Taffy hiked up her skirts and jumped. She nearly lost her balance, steadied herself and turned to find Catherine stumbling from her jump and nearly colliding with her.

“There ... now—off we go,” Taffy said.

“Not so fast, tart, not so fast,” said a hard, familiar voice.

Taffy realized Bruton must have been riding behind the coach. He was already off his horse and grabbing at Taffeta. He soon had her by the arm.

His mistake, for she brought up her foot and gave him a resounding kick to his privates. When he howled and bent over in pain, she took Cathy’s hand and screamed, “Come on, Cath!”

However, Bruton recovered quickly and took chase. Taffy heard him but kept up her pace, weaving through traffic. He was on her suddenly, this time taking hold of her hair and yanking hard, so hard she cried out, “Oww!” She then realized they needed help. She screamed out to her friend, “Run, Cathy, and get help! Tell them ...”

Bruton hissed into her ear. “It won’t do you any good. By the time they find us, you will be my wife and will have spent the night with me.”

Taffeta brought her heel down on his toes. As he screeched with anger and pain, she broke free and ran.

Once again, she tried dodging him by using the traffic of carriages and hacks to hide her as she darted in and out of traffic. She took a moment and pounded the door of one of the carriages but then couldn’t wait for admittance.

Even as she cried out for help, Bruton was on her. She ran as fast as her heart and legs could take her, but just when she thought she was getting away, the heel of her satin shoe broke, and she tripped on the curbing, going down to her knees.

Her gown was torn in several places, her slipper was broken, and still she picked herself up and started off, only to be cornered by him at the opening of a dark, long alley.

Bruton closed in on her and took her arm to drag her off screaming and kicking into the darkest part of the alley. There he hauled off and slapped her.

“Now, bitch, now ...” he said, and she saw he was about to knock her unconscious.

* * *

Seth and Nigel tried to understand what the small lad was trying to tell them but found it difficult to follow his message.

“Look here, lad. Who told you to give us this message? How did they know we would be here this evening?” Nigel asked.

“Oi don’t know ’is name, oi don’t ...” said the lad, shaking his small, dirty hands nervously. “’ee gave me a coin and told me jest to tell the Duke of Grantham and Lord Nigel to meet ’im at the Home Office—that’s all oi knows.”

Seth took out a few coins and handed them to the grubby street urchin. “There. Go get something to eat.” He watched the boy rush off and turned to frown at Nigel. “What the devil is all—hold on ...” He moved toward their coach just as it pulled away from the curbing.

“What the devil? I say, hold up, Thomas!” Nigel called out.

“Wait a moment. That isn’t Thomas. Who the devil?”

“Taffy!” they both said in unison. Seth slapped his uncle’s shoulder. “Come on.” He led the chase of the coach at a run.

However, as the coach made its way down the avenue, it had not yet hit traffic and so gained quite a distance on them. Seth stopped to catch his breath. They both bent over their knees as Seth sucked in air and grinned to see Nigel doing the same.

“What the deuce is going on here?” Nigel asked.

“We were diverted. Don’t you see? ’Tis Taffy’s vision. She is alone in the carriage with Catherine. They are being abducted!”

“But why?”

“Doesn’t matter why—come on,” Seth said, starting off again. However, a hackney came to a stop near them, and the driver nodded at them. “Need a ride, do ye, gents?”

Nigel looked at Seth, who then climbed up and took the reins from the driver. Nigel gave the driver a gold coin. “Don’t worry there, my good man, the duke is an excellent whip, and you’ll be well paid when we are done.”

The driver, appearing pleased enough with the guinea he already found in

his palm, nodded. "Right, then. Off we go."

* * *

Tarrant and Fenmore had alighted their coach just in time to see Nigel and Seth's behavior with the hack.

"What the deuce are those two doing now?" James Fenmore said with a shake of his head.

Tarrant felt something cold clutch his heart, and he whispered, "Taffy."

"You have no reason to think it has something to do with—"

"Oh, but I do—come on." Tarrant motioned for Fenmore's driver to move over as he climbed up onto the driver's bench and extended a hand to Fenmore.

"Do you know, I don't think I have ever been up here," Fenmore said as he sat beside Tarrant. "It is damn good fun."

"Hold on, James, my man—I mean to make these horses of yours move!"

"There!" He pointed. "I see them—there ..."

"Don't see them ..." replied Tarrant, frowning.

"Just ahead." Fenmore shook his head. "Whatever made them take the hack? It doesn't make any sense."

"It does to me," said Tarrant.

"Turning—there!" Fenmore's voice was full of excitement.

"Aye," said the Hotspur, feeling like the devil on the hunt. "Aye ..."

~ *Thirteen* ~

TAFFY'S HAND WENT to her stinging cheek as she backed up against the building. It was dark, and she tripped over something, going down on her hands and knees. When she stood back up, she leaned with her hands behind her back against the limestone wall of the building.

She was in a rage, but she needed to stall for time. They weren't so deep into the alley that a passerby wouldn't hear if she screamed. She needed to bide her time and make one last attempt to either escape or call for help. "You know," she said slowly, loudly, "if Tarrant doesn't kill you for this night's work, I shall. You will never be safe again."

"No? But I will be rich." He sneered at her.

"Do you think so? You will need to be alive in order to enjoy it, Bruton. So if I were you, I would think about what I was doing. In the end, it won't be worth it. I can promise you that."

"Shut up, tart. Just shut up. What do you know about the trials of poverty? I have nothing left. What little my father didn't gamble away, I have spent in maintaining our lands. I'll have your money, and that is all I am thinking about. That is all I care about." He shrugged. "It won't be so bad for you. I shall not be a difficult husband. In fact, I shall allow you to come and go as you please after our nuptials."

"Husband? I loathe you and shall never call you husband. Fool—you are a fool. You have not seen past your own immediate needs. You have not seen what the consequences will be. You will never call me wife, because you will be dead. I will happily, easily, slit your throat while you sleep if I have to, but I rather think Tarrant will obliterate you from the face of the earth long before that—*don't you?*"

Bruton frowned, but she taunted him. "Didn't expect I would escape your coach and ruin your plans?"

"You haven't ruined a thing."

"Catherine will tell, and they will know—"

"It will be too late. You will be my wife. I will own your fortune."

"Tarrant will make me a widow," she snapped angrily.

He frowned again and, sounding infuriated, replied, "What good will it do him? He will end in prison."

Taffy had positioned herself as subtly as she could and now used the moment. She swung the board of wood she had been holding at her back all

this while, and she swung it with all her might.

She didn't give him time to duck, and it hit him square.

She charged away from the alley, left it at her back, and was on the main thoroughfare a few seconds later, yelling with all her heart, "Help!"

* * *

They were slowed almost to a stop in traffic, and Tarrant saw her before he heard her. He threw the reins of the horses to Fenmore, nimbly jumped down from the carriage, and began to run.

Had his heart ever beat with such frenzy? Had he ever felt so slow? She was disheveled, her gown torn, and she was running as though for her life. Bruton, damn his soul, was at her back.

He reached her and held her as she collapsed into his arms, saying, "I knew you would come ... just a little while ago ... I saw it ..." And she began to cry.

He put her behind him as Bruton stumbled towards them. Tarrant then went forward to land Bruton a leveler. Even as Bruton hit the ground, Tarrant picked him up and hit him again.

He turned, took Taffy into his embrace and saw immediately, even in the dim light of the street lamp, that her cheek was bruised. "Taffy ... my own sunbeam ... did he do this?" Not waiting for her answer, he turned to pick Bruton up so he could hit him again, but Taffy stayed him.

"No ... oh, Thurston ... do just take me home."

Commotion erupted behind them, for Catherine had arrived with a beadle. Seth and Nigel also were there.

"Tarrant—you're here? We would have been here sooner ... saw Cathy running and screaming like a banshee ... Cathy never screams ... took off after her on foot," Seth announced in a breathless voice.

Fenmore, now on the scene, took Catherine's hands to his lips and cooed to her as the beadle began addressing Tarrant.

"Thank you, sir," said the Hotspur. "We can take it from here."

"Would ye be wanting to press charges?"

Taffy shook her head.

They didn't need a scandal, so Hotspur answered softly, "I think not ... as I said, we thank you for your quick service, but we will get him to where he belongs."

The beadle seemed well pleased for the compliment and the accompanying coin. He tipped his hat and moved off.

"Taffeta, I need you to go home with Catherine, your brother, and Nigel. Fenmore and I will see to Bruton. Will you do that for me?"

"What are you going to do? You must not kill him!"

"Never mind what I am going to do. Please, my love, Catherine too needs you, and you both need to get home to a hot tub and relax. I will call on you first thing in the morning."

“Right then ... but, Thurston ... I ...”

“Steady, my brave beauty.” He touched her under chin and then saw her and Catherine installed in the hack the boys had waiting for them.

“Take the ladies home, and not a word of this to anyone,” Tarrant said quietly before turning to Fenmore. Together they picked up the unconscious Bruton and threw him into Fenmore’s coach.

“What shall we do with him?”

“Drop him into the Thames,” Hotspur said harshly.

“Aye ...” Fenmore regarded his friend. “But, really?”

“Really,” replied the Hotspur wickedly.

~ Epilogue ~

One month later

Taffeta leaned into her husband as their gondola plowed through one of Venice's deep canals. Her rakehell had insisted on an early wedding and would wait only long enough for her to have a gown created and a wedding party assembled.

Their honeymoon had been, from the moment they began, a trip filled with laughter, new experiences, and lovemaking that took her to what she told him were depraved heights.

She had questioned him a few times over the last few weeks about Bruton, who had vanished from society. A part of her was worried her beloved had indeed killed the man in a fit of rage.

She looked up at him now and asked softly, "Tarrant, love, I need to know, and I need to know the truth, not a fairy tale. What have you done with Bruton? For when I asked Seth and Nigel, they said I must not ask and were convinced you drowned him in the Thames."

He laughed. "They must have had that from James."

"Did you drown him? I shall forgive you if you did, for he deserved it, but ... oh, I hope there won't be repercussions."

He hugged her fiercely. "If I drowned him, as was my first inclination, I would have done so in a manner where there would never be any repercussions to worry you. However, I allowed Fenmore to persuade me to take another route."

"Huh, what then?"

"Bruton was a desperate man. He was about to be served, and if he could not come up with the money he owed, he would have been hauled off to debtor's prison—perhaps even sent to Australia. I gave him a choice he didn't deserve."

"What choice? What did you do?"

"We, James and I, helped him pack all his belongings, and we delivered him to a ship that was about to depart for the Colonies. What do they call themselves, ah yes, the United States. I bought him a first-class ticket for the passage and gave him a tidy sum to invest when he got there. I rather think he will do well in the colonies—and hopefully stay there."

"Brilliant! You are absolutely brilliant," Taffeta said as she bounced in his

arms and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"I am, am I not?" He laughed. "And I want that kiss, but not on my cheek." He bent his head and brushed his lips against hers. "You drive me mad with need, do you know that? I want you all the time."

"The gondolier will hear you." She giggled and snuggled closer.

"Let him hear me." Tarrant sighed, settling back and looking around. "Ah, I think we are nearly there. Are you hungry, my sweet?"

"Yes, yes, I am starving, and I do so adore Italian food." She eyed him and said naughtily, "It is a shame we couldn't have drowned him. He did so deserve it."

He barked a laugh. "Wicked wife, you suit me, you fit me."

Taffeta sighed. "Next month James and Cath will marry. It will be so much fun. Their wedding will be beautiful. I shall be so proud to stand as her maid of honor with you as James's best man."

"Indeed, but I wish we had more time here in Italy. I love it so," he whispered softly.

"Yes, I do as well, but, Tarrant, we go to your grange, and that will be very exciting, and it is so very near Grantham that Seth and Nigel will be able to visit often, and—"

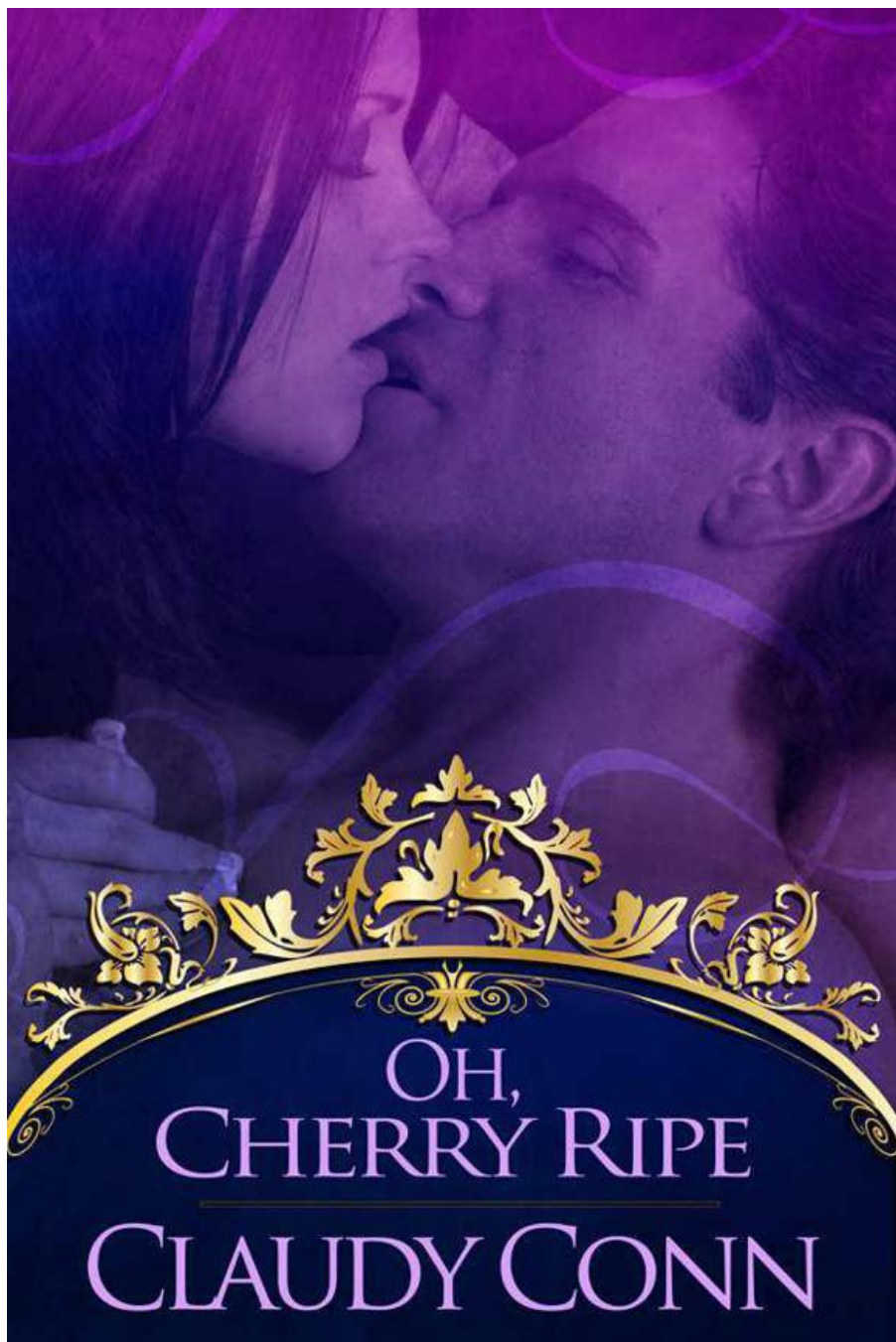
He laughed and said, "And who knows what my sunbeam and her rogues will get up to?"

She smiled sweetly. "Oh, yes, poor Tarrant. You could not have thought it out when you asked for my hand, for as I go, those two as well. Three for the price of one." She giggled.

"Rogues Three ... aye ... and my own sweet love. I wouldn't have it any other way."

~ End ~

Oh, Cherry Ripe



Oh, Cherry Ripe

By

Claudy Conn

Copyright Page

Oh, Cherry Ripe

By Claudy Conn

<http://www.claudyconn.com>

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Dedication

To my blue-eyed devil ...

Contents

Master Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

~ One ~

~ Two ~

~ Three ~

~ Four ~

~ Five ~

~ Six ~

~ Seven ~

~ Eight ~

~ Nine ~

~ Ten ~

~ Eleven ~

~ Twelve ~

~ Thirteen ~

~ Fourteen ~

~ Fifteen ~

~ Sixteen ~

~ Seventeen ~

~ Eighteen ~

~ Nineteen ~

~ Twenty ~

~ Twenty-One ~

~ Epilogue ~

*Her eyes like angels watch them still;
Her brows like bended bows do stand,
Threatening with piercing frowns to kill
All that attempt with eye or hand
Those sacred cherries to come nigh,
Till 'Cherry-ripe' themselves do cry.*

—Thomas Campion

~ One ~

CHERYL ELTON OPENED the door to her stepmother's sitting room and peeped around the corner of the bright and handsomely furnished room before she smiled sheepishly and asked, "You wanted to see me, Mama?"

Lady Elton's expression was grave and her lips set as she said in a reproving tone, "Come sit, Cheryl."

Cherry Elton did what she was told, not because she was an obedient miss but because she wanted to stave off the trouble she saw ahead.

Her stepmother affectionately brushed Cherry's long, thick, black hair away from her face and clucked. "I suppose you should start to wear your hair up most of the time now ... you certainly are of age."

"Yes, Mama, but I like it loose."

Lady Elton frowned, sighed, took a moment to smooth out the skirt of her gray satin day gown, and then looked into Cherry's bright aqua-blue eyes. "I want you to listen to what I have to say before you get yourself in a state."

"Mama, I know now that what I did was not quite the thing—" Cherry hurriedly began to explain. She knew this time she was in trouble.

"Not the thing!" spluttered Lady Elton, interrupting her. "Hopping on Lord Melville's stallion in the middle of Hyde Park—in your walking clothes—and then riding the animal astride with your skirt hiked up as you raced Sir Peter for all the world to see ... *not the thing*? Why, you miserable wretch of a girl! How can you sit there and look so innocent? If your father were alive ..."

Cheryl leaned forward and hugged her stepmother. "I am sorry." But even as her stepmother might have relaxed had she left it at that, Cheryl added, "Had I been a man and done that, I would have been called *top sawyer* ... but just because I am a female—"

"A man would not have had to hike up his skirts!" Lady Elton snapped.

“Cherry love, what am I to do with you?” She put up her hand to stop her stepdaughter from answering. “Enough. You know the rules that govern society. You know that what you do affects not only your own standing but mine as well in that same society. How dare you, child.”

This tore at Cherry. She loved her stepmother and meant her no ill. As far back as she could remember her stepmother had always loved her and her father and had been very good to her. “Mama, I didn’t think past the moment ... Peter was being the devil of a tease ... and there was Melville’s black looking so very fine and inviting and Melville goading me by saying he was too much horse for me to handle ... and ...”

“Yes, impossible creature, I do see, but that is where a young woman of your breeding and standing demurs and shames a gentleman into behaving with more decorum towards her.” Lady Elton clucked her tongue, and Cherry could see her mama’s thoughts racing. “However, I have the solution, and amazingly enough, *he* still wants you.”

“What *are* you talking about? *He*—who still wants me?”

“I knew that he was more than mildly interested, but I never dreamed he would actually come up to scratch ... and then, Lady Jersey said you would be refused vouchers to Almack’s because of your recent hoydenish behavior ... That awful woman never liked me—I daresay she was looking for the chance to ... but never mind, all will soon be well.”

“Jersey said she would refuse me entrée to Almack’s?” Cherry returned on a hushed note. She always thought the *haute ton* hostess liked her.

“No, no, not Sarah but the other one.”

“Princess Esterhazy? Stiff-rumped—”

“And that is another thing—your language. You spout terms like any man—stiff-rumped, indeed.”

“Well, I don’t care about Almack’s anyway,” Cherry answered.

“Then why are you pouting? This won’t do. You shan’t be admitted there this season, you dreadful girl. However, all is not lost. You will be married to the catch of the century, and they just might change their minds about you yet. No matter, you will be busy enough this season with your new life.”

“Married?” Cherry jumped to her dainty feet. “*I won’t!* No—what are you talking about?” Had she indicated any partiality for any of her suitors? No, she had not. How could her stepmother do this? It was absurd. She had refused no less than five offers in the past eight months. *What then*—this offer had to be from a virtual stranger. Who could have applied for her hand?

“Oh, but my girl, you will be married, and one day you will thank me for taking this high-handed method of settling you comfortably just when you were on the brink of scandal.”

“Mama, I don’t know what you are talking about. I must tell you that I have no intention whatsoever of marrying where my heart has not thrown in the towel, and I must advise you that my heart is very much my own.”

“And still you will be married, my darling, and he is just the man to set

you to rights,” Lady Elton returned gently but firmly.

“The devil you say!” her wayward stepdaughter retorted in just the style her stepmama deplored.

“Now that is precisely what I mean.” Lady Elton sighed. “You cannot go about using expressions like that one. It is most unbecoming.”

“And it is not becoming to marry a man I have never seen!” Cherry was now desperately wringing her hands. Her mama was talking absurdities, and she found it all incredible.

“His lordship is an exceptional man. He is handsome. He is wealthy beyond imagination, with a family name that dates back to—”

“What do I care for that? Mama, you are asking me to marry a man I have never met!” Cherry, now pacing frantically, screeched.

“Yes, dear, but often those matches turn out very comfortably.”

“I don’t want comfort!” Cherry snapped. “I want love ... passion—”

“That may come as well. When your dear father proposed to me, I scarcely knew him ... but after we were married, all those things came—”

“No, Mama—I want those things first!”

“Cheryl, you know nothing—”

“I know I won’t do this,” she said with a snort.

“You will meet him, and this will be done. Darling, I rather think you will even like him immediately. He is most charming and has experience enough to—”

“Ah! No doubt he is ancient.”

“Not quite ancient.” Lady Elton’s tone was dry. “Eight and twenty, and you, my dear, are one and twenty ... nearly past your prime. You are certainly past your first bloom and still on the town. It is, considering your exquisite looks and dowry, most odd.”

“Odd? It is what I want, and I am very willing to remain single forever. Mama, this is completely ridiculous.”

“No, darling, it is not ridiculous. I don’t know exactly what prompted him to offer for you, for quite honestly, he has never seen you either ... but offer he has, and I have accepted.”

Cherry’s mouth dropped, and it took a moment for her to recoup for the attack. “Indeed!”

“Dearest daughter, don’t you know that I fell in love with you even before I did with your father? I want the best for you, and believe me, this is. Some of the best marriages are created in this fashion.”

“And some of the worst. Marriage of convenience—for me? Never, Mama ... never.”

“No? Well, I am afraid you are out there, my love. His lordship will be by tomorrow morning to present himself to you, and, darling, mark me, you will marry him.”

“I won’t.” Cherry stomped her foot and felt terror fill her mind. What was happening to her world? It was all falling around her ears. Could her

stepmother force her to the altar? “This is monstrous of you!”

“I know you think that, but, darling, it is not what you imagine. He will treat you with respect. He is wise enough to handle you gently, tenderly. Why, you will hunt with him in the North, where he has a hunting box, and you will —”

“Mama!” Cheryl interrupted sharply. “I can’t believe you are doing this to me. You have always stood my friend. Now ... before my eyes, you have turned into a stranger. Worse, you are nothing more than a ... a stepmother from some horrid fairytale.” And so saying, Cherry fled the room.

~ Two ~

SKYLER WESTBROOKE STOOD at his bow window, the cozy warmth of his richly appointed study at this broad back. He turned and regarded himself in the mirror, staring into his own deep blue eyes. What was he doing?

He turned again and looked out onto the quiet London street. His right hand had formed a fist at his lips, for he was in deep concentration. His left hand unconsciously rubbed his muscular thigh where he had sustained a minor injury the day before.

He was consumed with agitation. The time had come to make his decision final. He had asked for the hand of Miss Cheryl Elton, and he would go through with it. He would wed the unknown chit and be done.

It was his only logical choice. At least one could not fault her heritage, her upbringing, her family connections. Hers was a fine, aristocratic line. Her father had been in politics; he had been a Whig like himself, and this was a plus. Miss Elton was reputed to be a lovely creature—in fact, several good friends had told him she was exquisite—though he'd also heard talk about her 'too high spirits', but he would curb that. Marriage would bring her in tow.

She was already one and twenty, so he wasn't robbing the cradle. It was a good age, beyond schoolgirl notions, old enough to mother his young brothers and sisters. He had been told she had a good head on her shoulders, which was well, for she would need it when she found herself with such a large ready-made family. And Miss Elton would understand what it was to lose one's parents, having lost both herself.

There it was; though he had never met her, he had thought it all out and chosen her to carry on his name and his household. As to the 'love' he had always looked for ... it just wasn't meant to be.

The one woman he had thought he loved had turned out to be a faithless, money-hungry, man-eating—*never mind*. He flicked it out of his head. The year had given him perspective. Love was not in the cards for him. He would be a good husband, and if a pretty ankle turned his head, he would be discreet ...

He walked over to his Regency writing desk, where an impressive collection of miniatures reposed in ornate silver frames. One was a portrait of his mother. On either side was framed a portrait of a man, the one on the left his father and the one on the right his stepfather. Then in order of their ages

were one of each of his siblings—two half-brothers and two-half sisters. First was Freddy, seventeen and away at Eton. Next was Mary, fourteen and also away at school. The twins, Felix and Francine, were eight and totally wild. They had managed between them to dispose of one governess after another, three in the last year. Damn, but they needed a woman's hand. They needed someone who was young enough to take them in tow ... and hopefully grow to love them as he did.

Marry he would, and his bride would be Cheryl Elton, for her spirit was just what he needed to run his wayward household.

It was logical ...

~ Three ~

GETTING OUT OF London was not as easy as Cherry had anticipated. She'd encountered several setbacks, though none had taken place as she stole out of the house. That, at least, had gone smoothly—too smoothly, for she had breathed a sigh of relief after exiting through the rear door and immediately assumed a far too cocky frame of mind.

She had reached the stables where her stepmother kept their horses housed and was met by a sleepy groom who eyed her with a touch of disapproval.

"Lookie ... why ... it's Miss Cheryl," he exclaimed in some surprise. His gray-brown eyebrows moved with great expression as he pulled at his lower lip. "Whot is it, miss ... trouble?"

"In a manner of speaking. I need my horse as quickly as you can ... no need for any real brushing or grooming, John ... please," she whispered, hoping he would not create any more of a stir than he had already done. She could see another stable-hand moving out of the recesses of the barn and curiously looking their way.

"Now, whot can ye be at, miss?" John shook his head. "Her ladyship wouldn't loike ye rambling about on yer horse at night, miss ... no, she would not. She would 'ave me 'ead, she would, if oi was to saddle yer Bessy and let ye go."

"Right then. Never mind. I'll saddle Bessy up myself," Cheryl said, quite willing to be reasonable. She didn't want anyone to incur her stepmother's wrath on her account.

John shook his head, for this did not make any sense to him. Thing was, he could see trouble ahead. "She'll 'ave me run through, she will, and nobbut could blame 'er. Oi jest can't let ye go off at this time of night. Miss Cheryl, forgive ol' John, but oi jest can't." He was pleading with her now.

"Can't you?" Cheryl's brow was up. "How do you mean to stop me?" She was already moving toward the tack room. He followed her hurriedly, and his voice had changed to a whine.

"Aw now, 'ave pity, do. Whot is it? Do ye want me turned off?"

Cheryl turned around with her saddle in her arms as she faced him. "John, you have been with us such a very long time and must know that my stepmother would never turn you off. And besides, she knows me—she will understand that you are not to blame in this."

By now she had put the blanket on her mare's back, hoisted the saddle on, and was cinching it in place. Bessy snorted, and Cheryl released a short laugh. "Yes, girl ... I know, but you didn't have any work today, so you shouldn't mind a nice easy night's walk."

She turned her attention back to John, who was gawking at her and pointing at her saddle. She realized she had not tacked up Bessy with the accepted ladies' sidesaddle and laughed softly. "No, I know, John, but who is to see at such an hour? And I do love riding astride so much better."

"Aye, but not in London, miss. Maybe in the country ... but—"

"Who is to see me? I will have my hood slung low over my head, no one will know me, and then I shall be much more comfortable when I get out of the city," she said, smiling brightly. "Don't fret it, John. I know what I am doing."

"Do ye indeed!" he snapped. "Oi've 'eard ye say that to me countless times and land yerself in the pudding."

She laughed. "Well, here is hoping that I shan't land myself in the pudding this night." She slipped the bridle in place and hooked the last of the leathers. She sighed heavily then as it flashed through her mind just what she was doing. "Never mind, John. You will tell my stepmother in the morning, for she shan't notice I am gone until then, that I simply took my horse and left before you could do anything about it. You had no choice in the matter, so you can't be blamed."

"Oi can't let it go loike that, Miss Cheryl. Oi've got to go to the 'ouse now and tell her ladyship that you've taken off alone. 'Tis me duty." He was shaking his head sadly, obviously hating the position he found himself in.

Cheryl reached out and touched his shoulder. "Of course, John. You do just what you think right." So saying, she led her horse to the mounting block outdoors and hoisted herself into the saddle, situated her riding skirt in place, yanked down its matching blue jacket, and tugged her black velvet cloak overall. She situated her hood so that it hung low over her face, turned to John, and added, "I'm afraid you won't find her at home, John. Her friends picked her up an hour ago, and they are all at the theater. Won't be home for hours." She smiled to herself, well pleased.

At his expression, she sighed. "Don't worry, John. I have my pistol with me, plenty of the ready, and I shall do just fine. You may tell my stepmother that I shall write her after I am established and have forgiven her ..." Her voice trailed off on this last. Forgiven her? Could she ever forgive her this awful betrayal? She had always believed her stepmother loved her, but if she did, how could she ship her off to a stranger—marry her to a stranger?

To Cherry Elton, this was an act that was beyond forgiveness or understanding.

* * *

Lord Sky Westbrooke gave his present situation a great deal of serious

contemplation and concluded that he was a young man greatly to be pitied. Depression weighed him down until there was only one thing he could do—drink himself into oblivion!

He reasoned with his better sense; he *was* sacrificing his life, wasn't he? He was being totally unselfish and giving the remainder of his years over to a strange woman for the sake of his family. *Egad!* He would soon be a husband, perhaps a father. All joy would soon be out of his reach ... gone forever ...

Damnation. Life, in fact, as he had known and enjoyed it, was certainly quite at an end. There was nothing for it: he would go to his friends, and they would all become royally inebriated together. This decision was taken on with great zeal and enthusiasm as his intimates toasted him and the end of his bachelorhood at White's Club.

Usually Sky found he was able to drink most men under the table before he began to show signs of being foxed. He was, however, certainly in his cups when he rose suddenly from the table, called for his coach to be sent for, and announced his intentions of departing the club for home.

"What's that you say?" Sir William attempted to sit up, for he had been resting his head on his bent arm, which was laid on the card table. "You leaving, Sky ...?"

"Must, Billy-boy. Have to present myself to my future bride in the morning. Don't want to scare the chit with bloodshot eyes and a haggard face ..."

Sir William grinned broadly. "Too late, lovey." He slid back against his chair and surveyed his closest friend through half-closed lids. "Don't do this, Sky. You're not ready, and you don't even know her. You will be tied for life, and that is hard enough when two people like each other. What if you hate her?"

His lordship's hand found Sir Williams' gold, silky hair and ruffled it affectionately. "'Tis done ... I have already offered. Can't be undone. Never mind—you will be following my lead soon enough, and then we will muddle through marriage together."

"Blister the words—damn if ever I will marry!" Billy retorted caustically.

His lordship laughed, bade everyone good night, and made his way outdoors. His driver and coach stood waiting, but Sky signaled his intention to walk, for he wanted the night air to clear his head.

While his conveyance followed at a discreet distance, he took a long drag of the strong, cool breeze, but it in no way cleared the fog through which he was unsteadily walking. This was ascribable in part to the very excellent brandy he had managed to imbibe and in part to the heavy, gray fog that had indeed descended upon London. He turned a corner, frowning over the fact that he could scarcely see more than ten feet in front of him, when something startled him into a sharp, uncharacteristically awkward movement.

Cheryl was not in the habit of riding her horse hard on pavement, let alone on a dimly lit street, and even though the circumstances warranted speed, she maintained a quiet pace. She had no doubts about her situation as she slowly trotted her mare toward freedom. She was sure she was doing the right thing. She would not be forced like some meek nothing of a girl into a loveless marriage. Her dear friend Lizzy had been forced into one just last year, and she was miserable while her awful husband chased everything in a skirt! That was not for her.

She had been so caught up in her defiant thoughts that she had not yet considered the dangers of her expedition. A fog had set in. She made an incorrect turn, backtracked, and found herself suddenly surrounded by a group of young, grimy street urchins. They blocked her path, and she put on a stern look as she commanded, “Do stand aside.” Her tone was firm and showed no signs of the sudden panic she was beginning to feel.

“Whot’s this? Why—’tis a mort, God love ye! A blooming mort. Fancy, ain’t she?” one of them said as he moved closer.

Cheryl lifted her crop out of her boot and held it menacingly. “I wouldn’t come any nearer if I were you.” A threat hovered in her voice and in the style of her movement.

He looked at the four boys with him now spreading around Cheryl and her mare and snorted. “She do be warning us, lads ... whot say ye to that?”

Cheryl didn’t wait for their answer. She gave Bessy some leg, and they moved immediately into a canter and headed straight for him. He cursed out loud and jumped out of her way.

They rounded the bend in the street, and there Bessy found something that frightened her more than the boys she had just encountered. The poor mare spied something dark and weaving ominously towards her, and as she blew out a snort, she hopped and bucked. Cheryl released a surprised cry, for she hadn’t expected this, and grabbed at her horse’s neck as she attempted to regain her seat and control of her reins. Bessy shifted to the left, and the force of the movement sent Cheryl the remainder of the way to the ground!

She landed on her feet but lost her balance and reeled backward into a body that felt more like iron than man.

* * *

She didn’t see him until she was on him. She felt a hard body and then a pair of large hands take hold of her shoulders and steady her. Instinctively, she reacted to his tight grip by stepping on his foot. Instead of letting her go, his grip tightened on her. She didn’t have time for this—from the way Bessy whinnied and jostled about, it was clear the mare was getting ready to bolt. He still held her fast as she tried to yank out of his steel grip. “Let me go, do please, I have to reach Bess!”

He looked hard at her face, and she watched the flitting expressions cross his countenance, noting that he was, even in the dim light, quite handsome.

However, he raised an eyebrow and said, "What the devil is a beauty like you doing out here alone at night?"

"My horse!" is what she answered as she tried reaching for Bess's reins.

"Stay here!" The stranger turned, moved gently towards the mare, and managed to gather her reins. Bess snorted but made no attempt to run from him as he spoke soothingly to her and led her towards Cherry.

"Your horse," he said softly.

"Thank you, but you didn't have to ... if you had just let me go, I could have gotten her and been on my way," Cheryl returned, feeling suddenly shy. Here was this fashionable, handsome rogue, and she felt she must look a fool.

"Ungrateful girl, and after you nearly knocked me down," he teased. His speech was only slightly slurred but enough for Cherry to raise her brow and regard him with some amusement.

"But I did not knock you down, and you, sir, were the cause for all of it," she answered, a smile curving her lips. "Whatever were you doing walking about in the middle of the road?" It was a counterattack to save face.

"I? Well, I was looking for an angel, and I found one ..." So saying, he had her well into his embrace, heedless of the fact that the driver of his coach watched with some keen interest at his back.

She did not know why, but she was not frightened in the least, although as his tongue probed and found hers with an expertise that made her feel warm and willing, she was surprised at herself. She pulled away hard, and rapped him across his shoulder. "How dare you!"

However, at this point he lost his balance and released her immediately. She slipped and nearly fell when he reached out to steady her. She slapped his hands away, and without thinking out her words, said, "Well, you haven't found one—an angel, that is, for no one has ever called me that!"

With one devilish movement he had her back in his arms, and his voice was husky and intent. "Are you not?"

She didn't have the opportunity to reply, for his lips were already on hers, already parting. His tongue found his way easily and teased with gentle skill. His hand pressed her body against his own, and she felt a frightening surge of desire. What was wrong with her?

Cherry was astonished, as much at herself and her reaction as she was at his sudden move. She had certainly enjoyed her London season and though innocent was not naïve. She had certainly been kissed before, often in fact, but this was the first time she had been so totally aroused. He was a stranger—ah, perhaps the excitement of the adventure was at work here, she told herself. She slapped at his shoulder, and when he released her she felt his eyes look into her hers. She made a face at him and announced in a whisper, "You, sir, are taking a liberty. I am at a loss, for you are taller, stronger, and perhaps wicked enough to pursue this further. If that is what you intend ... proceed, for I have always wondered what it would be like to be ravished on a London street." This was meant to make a mark and hit his sense of honor, and it did

that very well.

He pulled himself up to his full six feet and stared hard at her. "My dearest child, I am not in the habit of ravishing young women on London streets."

"Ah, are you not? Then I do apologize," she said meekly. Again a flush hit.

He growled at her. "What the bloody hell are you doing out here alone anyway? 'Tis folly."

He sounded to Cherry as though he were fast sobering up in spite of the drink she had tasted on his delicious tongue.

"I am running away from my ... er step ... father." She tweaked the truth just a bit, as she didn't need anyone putting two and two together.

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you that, but it would be very nice if you would let me go on my way before I am caught," Cheryl returned, smiling charmingly at him, but she could see by the curious expression on his face that he wasn't about to let this go so easily.

"Running away? Stepfather? This sounds like some blasted fairytale. You can't go about London alone at night. Might be accosted by any number of scalawags."

"So you have made me aware ..." she started, but he took up her arm and led her towards his coach.

"I shall take you to where you wish to go."

She could now see she had been wrong. He was not in the least bit sober.

"But I am going to the New Forest," she answered doubtfully.

"Are you? Whatever the devil for?" he asked, his brows well up.

"My nanny lives there. She will know what to do."

"For no good reason, that makes sense. Take you to your nanny," he announced happily.

Cherry was driven by her instincts. This would serve. He was bosky, yes, but she could see he was a gentleman. His first reaction was to see her safely to her nanny. That displayed to her satisfaction that he had no evil intent. Playful, obviously, but safe enough.

"Well, then, I shall tether Bess to the boot."

"Here, I'll do that," he said, taking the reins. He then tripped over himself, grinned boyishly at her, and fumbled with the leading rein to her horse.

She laughed and, pushing him slightly out of the way, saw to her horse herself before climbing into his coach. She was off on a grand adventure!

~ *Four* ~

CHERRY PEERED THROUGH the darkness of the coach. Lanterns hung on both sides of the interior, but they gave off only a dim light. Her companion sat quietly beside her, eyes closed, and appeared to be sleeping.

She wondered why she felt so comfortable with him. He was a stranger. She knew nothing about him, other than the fact that he was a splendid figure of a man. Yet she had allowed him to help her into his coach, tether her horse at the back, and drive off into the night. What was wrong with her? He was also quite thoroughly drunk; yet, he certainly conducted himself in excellent style. She had gone with her instincts, and her instincts were rarely wrong.

But, he stole a kiss from you, she reprimanded herself.

Yes, she answered the attack, *but such a kiss!*

There was nothing to do but relax against the luxuriant leather squabs of the seat and contemplate the dark landscape. Everything would be right as rain as soon as she was back with Nanny! She had always relied on her dear, sweet nanny ...

* * *

He appeared to be asleep, yes, but he was not. His one eyelid lifted now and then to watch her face as she looked out her window at the passing scenes. She was a beauty, the likes of which he had (and he had been with many) never seen before. A child still hung about her and seemed to be still very much in her make-up, but her kiss promised a man a woman in bed. He experienced a hard-on at the notion and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

She moved, and he caught a glimpse of her provocative body as she slipped off her dark cloak, setting it to one side of herself. Even in the dim light he could see that her clothing, while a simple riding ensemble, was made up of a fashionable Spencer of dark blue with black frogging. He watched her take off her kid gloves and undo the buttons to reveal a lacy, cream-colored shirtfront, and he was all too aware of her full breasts. A sure desire to touch once again stirred his loins and made him squirm uncomfortably. She looked his way, but then he supposed she was satisfied that he was asleep and turned away again.

However, pretending to be asleep was not getting him anywhere. He sat up, which got her attention, and he inquired in a husky voice, "Well, then, a name, please ... I must have a name."

“Oh!” She gasped. “I thought you were asleep.”

He moved to her side of the coach and pressed closer. “Now, how could I sleep with you so near?”

“Hmmm,” she answered agreeably. “I had been thinking the same about you.”

He laughed and looked at her face before he took her now ungloved fingers, found her wrist, and put it to his lips. It was, he knew, audacious, and he was surprised that she did not object. “Now then, my beauty, what is your name?”

“Sarah ... Parker,” she said easily but fidgeted and did not meet his eye; however, before he could continue to question her, she took over and asked, “And yours, sir?”

“Ah.” His voice was low as he bent his head and nibbled at her neck and then her ear, again surprised that she allowed it. “Shall I tell you now or later?”

His efforts he knew had excited her. He was an experienced man and understood her reactions at once. But she seemed in control and pulled away from him.

“Now, if you please,” she answered. “And do stop that, sir.”

It irritated him that she called him sir. It was not what he wanted to hear on her lips. However, wariness got past the drink, and he thought he would give her his middle name, “Justin,” he said.

“And is it not followed by another?”

He was reluctant to tell her he was Lord Westbrooke. It might put her to caution, it might make her feel uncomfortable, and it could also get him into trouble. “All you need to know is that it is Justin.”

“Is that so? And will you heed me if Justin is all I have to go by?”

“If your lips speak, I must always take heed,” he answered gallantly.

She giggled. “Then do release me, sir, for you have me in quite a tight grip.”

Indeed, he had her pressed to himself so he could feel her beautiful, well-shaped, full breasts up against him. He smiled at her, only loosening his hold a mite. “You still have not called me by my name.” He bent and dropped a soft kiss on her lips, noting with pleasure how full and ripe they were.

“Justin, then, please ... I trusted you not to take unfair advantage of me,” she said softly.

Her words nearly sobered him, and he sat up straight, saying lightly, “Advantage is not something I meant to take of you, child. You have naught to fear from me.”

She smiled. “Do you see any fear in my eyes?”

He looked into them and said, his voice low and hungry once more, “No ... I see a contradiction to your words. I see an invitation. Do they lie?”

“No, for you were very kind to take me all the way to Lymington—a five-hour journey at best—and the truth is I was loath to do it by myself in the

dead of night.”

“Zounds, woman, I don’t know what can have driven you to it,” he exclaimed with some feeling. She had a vixen-like quality that was most appealing if not downright seductive.

“I have my reasons, believe me,” she answered simply and smiled softly at him.

“How old are you?” he demanded suddenly.

“One and twenty,” she answered proudly.

“Lord, then why aren’t you safely married?” he asked with genuine surprise.

“Haven’t fallen in love yet.”

He laughed caustically. “Love is a notion. It doesn’t really exist. Settle for comfort, child.”

She sighed. “You are so unfeeling ... unromantic. I am afraid that I would not be comfortable without love in my marriage.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about. Love is a deuced nuisance. Settle for friendship. Love mucks up a person’s mind, be sure of it,” he grumbled and sat back against the thick squabs to contemplate his remark with more anger than sadness.

He turned when he felt her eyes bore through him and frowned. “What?”

“I see what it is. Some awful woman has hurt you very desperately.”

He made a motion with his hand, and his expression scoffed the idea, but his mind felt a rush of surprise. How could she know that? “Makes a nice tale, but I have never let a woman close enough to hurt me.”

“How sad,” she said with a long sigh.

He eyed her with a mischievous grin. “Why is that sad? Ah, for the women who have missed their chance?”

She laughed. “Nooo—that is not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“I meant that you have a very cynical attitude about women, about love, and that is what is sad.”

“Is it? I rather think it is wise. Love often spoils what a man and woman could have together.”

“And what can they have without love?” she was surprised into asking.

He answered her in his fashion—with action. Once more she was drawn into his embrace, once more she heard his low murmur, and once more she felt her blood begin to make a hot, rushing target of her heart as he murmured, “Here, beauty, let me show you ...”

His lips parted hers, nibbled at her lower lip, and seduced her mouth to open wide for his sensuous tongue until it was making love to hers. His hand moved from her waist and found her full breast. In shock, she pushed at him and sat away as she eyed him warily. She rebuked him quietly. “Please, Justin ... *do not*.”

“No? Don’t you want me to kiss you?” he teased, flicking her nose with

his forefinger in an easy, affectionate manner. "Because your body tells me otherwise."

"Well, as to that, you do it so well and you are so very handsome that it would be very odd for me not to want you to kiss me. However, my body does not rule my head."

He laughed out loud. He had never before encountered such a forthright-speaking chit. He took her chin between his fingers and told her, "I like you, Sarah Parker." He then sighed. "But you are certainly a brat and one that is on the run ... so very odd ... this is all so very odd."

She pulled away from his touch. "I am too old to be called a brat, and it is not odd. If men would only stop thinking women do not know what they want ... things might improve."

He laughed again. "A brat and yet too old to be single," he retorted tauntingly.

A tease lit her face. "Is this a proposal, Justin? You know just because you kissed me doesn't mean I expect you to marry me."

He laughed at that and pulled her back into his arms. "Aye then, so I may safely kiss you again ..." And he proceeded to do just that.

What was she doing? She asked herself that over and over again, but she knew. She was kissing a perfect stranger. She was embarking on a wild adventure ... much like Lady Caroline, only she did not approve of Lady Caroline, and that made her frown. She sighed and pushed him away.

"Enough, sir."

He sighed, but the drink had taken over and made him sleepy. He smiled, touched her cheek, and proceeded to fall asleep with his head in the corner.

~ Five ~

THE MORNING CAME blasting before Lady Elton's hazel eyes. It was not the brightness of the day that sent her bolt upright in her bed. It was not the hot cocoa that burnt her tongue that sent her into a thither. It was the answer to the casual question she had put to her maid, "Is Cherry dear still in bed?"

"No, m'lady ..." ventured Lady Elton's maid, avoiding eye contact. She had not found Cheryl Elton in the house and had already, in fact, sent a lackey to the stables to inquire after her.

"No? Where is she then?" Lady Elton asked, feeling a twinge of something she could not then explain to herself.

"I am not certain, m'lady," the maid returned, setting out her ladyship's clothing for the morning.

"Are you not?" Lady Elton's brow was up. She was aware that her dear Maria was overly fond of Cheryl and would 'cover up' for her if she could. "Indeed. Have Miss Cheryl attend me at once."

"That I would, m'lady, if I could," Maria primly answered, her hands folding into themselves against her midriff.

"But you can't, can you?" Lady Elton was near to shrieking. "Why not? Where has that dreadful girl of mine gone?"

A soft knock sounded at the closed door, and Maria went to open it a crack, stepping out into the hall when she saw who it was. Her ladyship heard the exchange of whispers with full misgiving as she got up, slipped on her robe, and padded over to pull the door wide. There stood two guilty-looking employees, and she demanded, "Where has she gone off to? No fabrications, if you please."

"It would appear Miss Cheryl 'as ... run away," the lackey said and lowered his gaze.

Lady Elton's hand went to her heart. Families had been ruined for lesser scandals than this would cause should it be discovered. "Run away ...?"

Maria began to cry and turned to shout at the lackey. "You will not speak of this to anyone ... do you hear me?"

He nodded and began backing up as he answered, "Never ... never would oi do so ... loike working 'ere and mean no 'arm to Miss Cheryl, who 'as always treated me foine ..."

The boy was allowed to vanish, and Maria went to hug her ladyship and

cry, "The poor wee darlin'. Ye can't go bring a lass like she be to her knees. It won't fadge, m'lady, and so I warned ye, I did."

"Run away ... but ... why?"

"Why? Did ye not tell her she would have to marry a total stranger?"

"Yes, but—"

"A man she had never clapped eyes on?"

"Yes, but ... oh ..." Her ladyship suddenly realized that very man was due later that morning. "Maria, what shall I tell him?"

"Miss Cheryl will not be seeing anyone as she is in bed with a quinsy."

"Yes, that will work." Lady Elton grabbed her trusted maid's shoulder. "That will work, and a quinsy will give us time to find her and bring her home."

Lady Elton felt a wave of nausea shake her inner being. "My girl has always been so capable, so clever ... but, Maria ... she left all by herself." A tear formed and rolled down her plump cheek. "Did she not realize ... in the end, if she did not care for him, I would not have forced her to marry ... oh, Maria, what she must think of me!"

"Miss is not a biddable girl. Ye set her against him just by telling her she hadn't a choice. I told ye what it would be, I said let them meet first ... see if he suits her, but, no, ye wouldn't listen to Maria—"

"Stop it, you dreadful woman! Can't you see I am upset enough? Where can she be?"

"She is a good-hearted girl. As soon as she can, she will send ye word, she will."

"What if she is in trouble, Maria? What—"

"Now, now, my lady ... ye know as well as I that Miss is more likely to be causing trouble than to be in it. She can take care of herself."

* * *

Sky Westbrooke held his head, closed his eyes, and held up his hand to block the morning's bright rays of sunshine. He had to steady himself, which he attempted to do.

He reopened his eyes and found his reflection in the long looking glass before him. Seeing his dark blue eyes lined with red, he exclaimed, "Egad!"

Another groan escaped him, and as he stared at himself, he thought the devil himself couldn't look worse. His black hair was ruffled in wild disorder, and he looked older than his twenty-eight years. Last night had become something of a blur. Where he was, precisely, he hadn't a clue, and how he had got there was a total mystery.

What he did recall, vividly, was a pair of sparkling aqua-blue eyes and a lilting, musical bubble of laughter. Little vixen. Somehow she had dragged him to the New Forest itself, or had he offered to escort her there?

No matter; they had taken a drive that seemed to have flit by but he knew was at least four or five hours. He had found himself rousing a plump and

sweet-faced elderly woman who clucked her tongue at him and ushered them within her small salon. There seemed something unreal about the entire memory.

Somehow the pretty ... Sarah Parker, he remembered her name, had told him he could sleep on the small sofa, but he had removed himself and his driver to the local inn. That's where he was ... *at an inn!*

Bloody hell! He had an appointment to meet with Lady Elton and finish up the details of his betrothal in an hour. He sighed and supposed he wouldn't be making that appointment anytime soon.

The best thing he could do was bathe, dress, and return home, where he would send a letter of apology and a request to meet his intended on the following morning.

He sighed as he thought about leaving without visiting Sarah Parker, for she was a delectable piece of fluff he was sure he could bed with a little effort. She was a mystery, though, and he wished he could remain and uncover her secrets. She was a gently bred miss, yet wild to a fault, running about in the dead of night. She had the air of quality, and yet she was remarkably independent—and he had found himself totally drawn to her. However, life was taking him in another direction, and it would be best if he put the little vixen out of his mind ...

* * *

The new morning's rays of sun seemed brighter in the New Forest as Cheryl blinked, moved lazily in her soft bed, and then, with sudden recall, sat bolt upright. "Faith!" she exclaimed out loud as the events of the night came pouring into her mind.

She had slept deeply and without incident—couldn't even remember dreaming—and now in the newness of the late morning she realized just what she had done and just what the consequences would be. "Oh ... oh ..."

Her eyes rose heavenward. "What have I done?"

Her outrage with her stepmother's announcement that she had 'picked out a husband' for her had led her astray and into uncharted seas. Now she was a bit in the suds, but she told herself she didn't have a choice—she had to see it through.

She recalled how unbending her stepmama had been and clucked over the memory. What was done was completely done. In fact, if she had remained, she would soon be greeting a total stranger and hearing her mother call him her fiancé! No—oh no.

Her anger came to her rescue and advised that she was very right to have run away. Her stepmama had meant business and left her no choice in the matter. Cherry would not be tied to a man she didn't even know!

A knock sounded at her bedroom door, and a plump, pink, sweet face appeared. "Ah, so my little widgeon is finally awake?" Polly Corbett clucked her way into the room and moved to the nightstand to set down her tray.

“Oh, Polly ... please don’t be angry with me.” Cherry jumped to her feet and threw her arms around the plump woman.

“Whist with you, silly goose. Of course I am not angry.” Polly sat down and sighed as her hand slid back and forth over the armrest of the maroon brocade upholstered ladies’ chair. She indicated the cup of hot cocoa with her chin. “Sip your cocoa, and you and I will have a nice long chat.”

Cherry took up the warm brew, plopped on the bed, and pulled the covers round her underclothes. “I don’t know where to begin, and don’t tell me at the beginning, for then this might take forever.”

“Straight and to the point—no bends. Start at where you think this particular beginning might be, and if I think there is more that I need to know, I will tell you.” Polly was no fool, and she knew her girl very well.

“First, and to be fair to Mama, I should tell you that I have been kicking up quite a lark after lark in London.”

“So I gathered from your letters.” Polly nodded.

“Yes, well, my last little adventure seemed to cause more than a stir ...” Cheryl bit her bottom lip. “Oh, Polly, Mama said an Almack’s patroness had actually indicated to her I would be refused a season’s voucher.” She frowned. “Not that I care a fig for such things ... but Mama does, and I must admit I did find myself snubbed by some of the dowagers at the last function.” Sighing, she looked at her former governess/nanny and admitted, “*You* would not have approved.”

“No, child,” Polly said gently, “but tell me before you tell me anything else. What prompted you to create such a fuss?”

“Polly—rules for women are outrageous. They suffocate what a woman can be, what she can do ... women like myself need to break out and change things ...”

“Yes, dear, but that isn’t what all this is about, is it?”

“No, it is London ... I wish I were back at Elton running about the country as I was wont to do ... I don’t want to look for a husband. I think it will just happen when it is meant.”

“Ah, in London you must sit properly, dance properly, never ride astride ...” Polly smiled sweetly. “I understand that all went against the grain, and the longer you had to endure, the worse your behavior became. Just like my girl.”

“I have been so heartily bored ... and then one of the young men who is forever courting me challenged me in Hyde Park.”

“So you took up this rascal’s challenge ... and did what?”

“I galloped through Hyde Park at the fashionable hour—not just galloped, Nanny, but I raced this outrageous London beau ...” Cherry let the remaining words trail off as she pulled a face and recalled vividly what she had done. The expression on her dear nanny’s face made her realize just how brazen she had been.

“Dear God, dearest child, there is little worse than that!” Nanny returned

in shocked accents.

"I suppose, and Mama was so very enraged. I have never seen her like that before."

"Never say you ran away because your mama was angry with you?"

"No ... not exactly ..."

"And don't bamboozle me with a tale about being shy about the gossip that must have ensued. You have never given a fig for such things."

"No ... not exactly ..." Cherry repeated before she squared her shoulders and allowed her aqua-blue eyes to meet with her nanny's clear gray.

"Well, then—why did you run away, dear, and in the dead of night?"

"Nanny ... dearest Polly, you ... I know you will agree that I had no choice. Mama was about to marry me off to a man I have never met!" A wave of indignation swept over her even as she spoke. "I told her I wouldn't, and she said she would see to it that I would." Her shoulders dropped, and she added, "Nanny ... I always thought that if I ever married, it would be for love ..."

Nanny took all of this in with a growing frown. "She couldn't have meant it, dearest. This start is most unlike Lady Elton. I can't believe she would force your hand into marriage."

"Well, at first I didn't think so, but she said all my chances of making a respectable match were ruined. She thought all the mamas of marriageable prizes would object to me because of my long list of scandals."

"Why then did this—who is he anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know, and I don't know why he didn't mind, because Mama said he didn't, which means he does know, so there must be something terribly wrong with him. He means to stick me somewhere no doubt where I shall be alone and miserable while he goes about his usual business. I got the notion that he is something of a seasoned rake, so he probably needs an heir. It doesn't matter, for I shall never return to Mama's house. I can't trust her anymore."

"*You can't trust her?*" Nanny was moved to exclaim in shocked accents. "You are the one who has behaved in a fashion that at best can only be called ... wayward, and now you say don't trust Lady Elton? It is absurd, darling, and well you know it."

"Polly, don't you see? If I were to go back ... things would be worse than ever. I have done yet another unforgivable thing. I have run away from home, and in the middle of the night. By now all the servants know it, and faith, if they know it, all of London will soon know it. I can never go back ..."

"Nonsense. The Elton household adores you. We will return together and shall put it about that I had you with me."

"I can't risk it ... any of it ... don't want to marry a stranger, remember, and now Mama will force me ... I can't go back."

Polly knew the look her former charge now wore. Obstinate. Perhaps what it needed was time. And she would send off a note posthaste so further

scandal could be averted.

“Which brings us to the topic of that nice gentleman who brought you safely to me.” Polly suddenly changed the subject.

In spite of herself, Cherry felt her cheeks get suddenly hot; she was sure she was bright red. “Yes, well ... that was all very odd to be sure, and I can see how you might wonder, but there is a perfectly good explanation ...”

“I am certain there is, and I should be most interested to hear it,” Polly answered sweetly.

Cherry peeked an uncertain look at her and tried to appear casual as she answered. “He discovered me riding along in London and rather thought I should not be allowed to head out for the New Forest alone.”

“Yes, so he said,” her nanny returned with an encouraging look. Then when Cherry seemed disinclined to add anything further to this, she said, “I did, however, find him to be a complete gentleman and shall allow the matter to rest ... for now, but I am not fooled, young lady. He was most certainly and totally foxed, and you ... you were most improperly clothed.”

“Yes, he was in his cups ... I know, but better I thought by the time we reached here.” Cherry giggled behind her hand.

Polly got to her feet, adjusted her mobcap around her short gray curls, and said, “When you have washed and dressed—and, Cheryl love, you may be in the country but you are not to don britches.” She eyed her warningly. “Then come with me to the garden, for I need to do some thinking.”

“Yes, Nanny, but if I were a man, all this would be nonsense.”

“But you are not a man, and, my dear, it is still very much a man’s world.”

Sadly, Cherry thought, this was true ...

~ Six ~

LORD SKY WESTBROOKE was announced, albeit a day late, and Lady Elton put a wavering hand to her forehead as she prepared herself for the bold lie she was about to tell.

She watched him as he strode towards where she sat on her pretty yellow ladies' chair and was again struck by what a fine figure of a man he was. If only her Cherry had at least taken a 'look' at him. Ah well, that was past.

He bent over her hand and murmured some apology about being a day late and having business. She waved this off and said the carefully prepared words, "My lord, I don't know how to say this after you came all the way here, but my darling girl awoke this morning with a terrible malady."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," he said, frowning.

"Indeed, the doctor says it is not serious, but time-consuming ..."

"Time-consuming? I don't understand," he said. As she indicated for him to be seated with a pat on the sofa near her chair, he sat.

"Well, it is ... the ..." Her eyelashes fluttered. "I blush to say it ..."

"Blush, then, my lady, and say it." His lordship appeared impatient to know what was amiss with his intended bride.

She eyed him a moment and said, this time not looking at him, "The measles, my lord. She is in no danger but, of course, cannot be seen for the time being."

"The measles?" he said thoughtfully with his head inclined and just the correct amount of sympathy in his voice. "I am sorry to hear it. You will please send her my regrets."

"Yes, of course," Lady Elton murmured, thinking she had managed the matter very well. He seemed to accept it without any problem.

"I shan't keep you." He was already up and bending over her hand. "I am certain Miss Elton must need you."

"Thank you, my lord. You are most understanding, my lord." She watched him stride out of the room and felt herself relax a moment. She had bought some time ...

* * *

"I wish, dearest Nanny, you would take me more seriously," Cherry pleaded.

"I do see what *you think* you want, and I am taking you seriously,"

returned Cherry's nanny with a grave sigh. "You are most welcome to stay on with me for as long as you like, but not until I have returned."

Cherry stopped and eyed her nanny questioningly. "Returned? Returned from where?"

Polly Corbett met Cheryl's glance with a straightforward eye, but a blush stole into her cheeks all the same. "From my honeymoon."

"Honeymoon?" The word was a shriek. It was followed by a clap of hands, and then Cheryl threw her arms around her nanny's plump body. "You are getting married! This is superb and wonderful."

Polly Corbett smiled softly and said in a quiet voice, her eyes suddenly liquid gray, "I think you will like Harry very much."

"I am certain I shall, but what is important, Polly, my sweet, adorable nanny, do you like him?"

"Why, yes, dear."

Cherry could see something of the 'little girl' in her nanny's expression, and it filled her heart. She hugged her again and asked on a serious note, "Is it love, Nanny?"

"I understand that you are asking if a woman of my age can be in love. And the answer is yes, my girl, yes. Perhaps not as wildly, or as blindly, as one does when one is in their first bloom, but most definitely, just as deeply."

Cherry dropped a kiss on her nanny's hand and said in a hushed tone, "Oh, dearest Nanny, I am so very happy for you ... so very happy."

"Yes, but the timing leaves us in somewhat of a bind—"

"Never mind that." Cherry broke in impatiently. "You must not think of anything but your upcoming nuptials."

"Yes, but—"

"It doesn't change the fact that I am hiding away from Mama, Almack's, London beaus, and London gossip. I shall hide here alone, and no one shall know."

Polly was startled. "No, my dear, you cannot even—"

"That is unless you can send me off somewhere as a governess before you get married?" Cherry cut her off.

"Nonsense. You are talking in absurdities."

"Why? I think I should like to be a governess."

"Tis not a game."

"I would take the job very seriously, and perhaps it is what I need to mature ... to take care of children?"

"Cheryl, love, there is not a wife alive that would allow you to be underfoot and in her husband's eye!" Polly finally got it out.

"But ... why ... ?"

"Use your brain, child. Would you want a beautiful, exquisitely shaped, and younger woman running about in front of a husband you love?"

"Ah ... men being men ... all would succumb?"

"Well, perhaps not all, but what is the point in tempting them?"

“Hmmm, this is a problem, but perhaps you think I am beautiful only because you love me?”

“Cherry, you must know better by now.”

“But, Nanny, I have the skills. I love children. Don’t you remember how nicely I managed with the Parson children and the work I did at the orphanage near Elton?”

“Quite different.”

Thus, this argument continued throughout the course of the day and would have continued the following morning had they not been interrupted.

* * *

“I told you, work at the orphanage was work suitable to your station in life. Being a governess is ... not.”

“You were a governess.” Cherry put her arm around her.

“Yes, but ...” Polly stopped and, putting a finger up, turned her head to look away from the herbs she was collecting from her garden as the sound of wheels grinding over pebbles in the drive came to a stop.

Cherry and her nanny looked over her white picket fence to find a well-outfitted and handsome coach had arrived. She said as much to herself as to Cherry, “Why, who can that be?”

Cherry and Polly stood back and watched as the shiny black door of the coach opened and an elderly gentleman clothed in somber gray attire descended the steps, with his cane clasped in his gloved hand.

“Why, it is Mr. Trekner,” Polly whispered. Then with a wave of her hand, she called out, “Here, sir ... in the garden.” In an aside to Cherry she commented, “I wonder what brings him here?”

The elderly man looked around at the sound of her voice and smiled warmly as he moved towards the white gate. “Miss Corbett,” he said as he tipped his hat and made his way towards them.

He bowed his head and said softly, “My, my, you are looking fit, Miss Corbett. How long has it been since I have seen you? Five ... maybe six years?”

Polly laughed. “More like two, sir, and how nice to see you again, but what brings you to the New Forest?”

“You, indeed, you bring me,” he answered gravely.

“Really?” Her brows rose, and then she indicated the stone bench at her side, saying simultaneously, “Oh, how remiss of me ...”

Cherry went forward, worried that her nanny would slip and give her real name. She stuck out her hand. “Sarah Parker ... how do you do?”

The elderly man had removed his top hat as he sank onto the stone bench across from where Cheryl was standing. He eyed her keenly for a moment as she smiled at him but asked no questions. It appeared he had problems of his own; perhaps he sensed she did as well.

Miss Corbett offered refreshments and an invitation inside, but he

declined, waving this off with his cane before settling it down. "There, there, Polly, don't fuss. I'm not really here socially."

Polly eyed him doubtfully. Theirs was an old acquaintance. He had known her father, and he had been instrumental in Polly obtaining her first post as governess. She was not one to put things off and inquired abruptly, "Well then, Mr. Trekner, why are you here?"

He smiled appreciatively at her. "Ah, Miss Corbett, I need your help."

"Of course, if I can," she offered at once.

He leveled a bold glance at her. "Miss Corbett, I need you to do what you do best—manage a pair of wayward, unhappy children."

"My word, what can you mean?"

"You will recall that I wrote to you and inquired whether your services as governess would be available for the Bromley twins?"

"Yes, yes," she interjected quickly, "and as I explained in my letter, I am retired. There were two qualified ladies of my acquaintance that I did, however, recommend to you ..."

"So you did. Excellent women, both of them. The twins ousted the first in less than six weeks. The second took them only one month to be rid of. The remunerations both were offered to reconsider and stay were quite exceptional ... and still, they ran."

"Faith! Poor dears." Polly clucked.

"Indeed, those two women were quite wretched when they left."

"No," she responded, "I meant the children."

"The children?" He appeared surprised.

"Yes, of course. Only think how very miserable and confused they must be."

"Then you will do it?" His face brightened.

She shook her head. "No, I am afraid I cannot."

Despair could be seen in his aged eyes. "I am at my wits' end," he said quietly.

"Sir, dear sir. I would do it if it were at all possible. But I am about to be married on Sunday."

He looked at her and smiled. "Are you indeed? I am happy for you, dear. Is he deserving?"

"I think he most certainly is," she answered softly.

Cheryl had worked up her courage during this discourse and stuck in, "I will do it!"

Mr. Trekner and Polly both looked at her. He shook his head. "You are scarcely more than a child yourself."

"No, I am not a child, sir. I am one and twenty. Miss Corbett was one and twenty when she took on her first charge, and I can do it. I know what it is to be a troubled child. I can deal with them, and I am young and strong enough to handle what they throw at me."

Again he shook his head. Cheryl frowned and inquired, "Is it that you

think their mother will not approve?"

"No, no ... they lost their mother more than a year ago—their father before they had the opportunity to even really know him. That is the problem. They haven't any parental supervision, which is why I think you are just too young to handle the situation ... without guidance."

"I was raised to manage a household. I am skilled in French and Spanish. My math is poor, but my knowledge of literature is certainly wide ... How old are they, by the way?"

"Twins ... the boy, Felix, and his sister, Francine, are eight years old and full of mischief."

"Please, sir, they need me, and at this point in my life ... I need them."

He stared at her while Polly took all of this in quietly. Finally Polly said, "This is perfect for all concerned. It is exactly what Miss ... er ... Parker ..." Sarah Parker had been Cherry's mother's maiden name, and she was prevaricating, but perhaps the end might justify the means. "... needs, and I do believe she will be good for the twins."

"Perhaps," Mr. Trekner said thoughtfully, "but there are more ..."

"More what? Children?" Cherry was surprised into asking.

"In a manner of speaking, though they shan't trouble you. There is Mary. She is fourteen and presently attending finishing school, and there is Frederick. He is seventeen and attending Eton."

"If they haven't any parents ... who has the care of the twins now?"

"That is the problem. They are under the care of the servants until their oldest brother can attend them."

"Who is he that he can't attend them immediately?" Cherry asked in some surprise.

"That doesn't matter—he is busy in London, active in Parliament, and has duties that have detained him in London at the moment, but I am certain he will return to Bromley Grange as soon as he may."

"Darling ..." Miss Corbett turned to Cheryl. "If you do this, you must see it through. You must not leave these children."

"You know me, Polly—you know I would never do that. Perhaps this is what I have always been suited for ...?"

Miss Corbett eyed her ruefully. "I doubt that, but I do think this will be the making of you—and the children."

"Now, just a moment! I haven't offered her the position yet."

"Do you have a choice?" Miss Corbett's brow was up.

He sighed heavily. "Then I suppose we are agreed?"

"Oh, we are most definitely agreed." Cherry almost laughed.

Mr. Trekner cast his eyes towards the sky and silently prayed.

~ Seven ~

TWO FAIR-HAIRED CHILDREN looked into one another's blue eyes and grimaced. "Well ..." the boy said on a defiant note, "she won't stay. None of them do, and this one won't be any different."

His sister eyed him sadly. "I don't know, Felix. Maybe this one will like us ... maybe ... and then it will be different. It just might be nice to have someone—"

He pulled a face at her. "What's that you say? Someone to tell us what to do—when to go out, when to do this or that—keep us from the stables?"

They were at that moment on their way to the stables, for horses were a passion with both of them.

"Hmmm. I shouldn't like to be kept from the horses, and that last governess was dreadful about it. She did have to go ..." his sister mused.

"Aye, just let me look after us. I know what to do."

"Still, this one is supposed to be a friend of Mr. Trekner's, and we do like him."

"What is that to say to anything?" he scoffed. "He is a man." As if this statement settled the matter, he proceeded, expecting the subject to be closed. It wasn't. His sister wasn't ready to let it go.

"Yes, but, Felix ... if this one does turn out to be ... er, pleasant, promise me you won't put a frog in her bed like you did to the last one."

He stopped and went very still for a moment before he exclaimed in some surprise, "But, Francie ... that was *funny*! You laughed too!"

"So I did, but she deserved a frog in her bed," his sister answered thoughtfully.

"And this one will get the same if she sends us off to bed without dinner," retorted her brother, ready for a fight.

She could see she wasn't getting anywhere and decided to let the matter drop for the time being. At any rate, they had reached the large, rambling barn, and the frown had vanished from his face as Spike, their pony, came into view. Felix called out his name, and they both squealed with delight as the pony raised his small head and returned their greeting with enthusiasm.

Thomas, the head groom, smiled and moved towards them as they fed carrots to Spike and cooed affectionately to the pony.

"Seen Brown Glaze yet, darlin's?" Tom asked with a nod at them.

"That we did, Tom, and looked her over in her pen, but we didn't see any

signs,” Felix answered, his face alight with keen interest.

“Didn’t ye now? Well, well ... she be waxing all right, and I think it could be tonight.”

“Tonight?” Francine shrieked. “Oh, Tom, we want to be there when she foals, please, please ...”

“Now, now can’t be spending the entire night in the barn, ye know.”

“Yes, we can, please, Tom. No one will know.” Both twins pleaded, hands pyramided placatingly as they closed their eyes with their hopes.

Tom turned suddenly, his attention elsewhere as he put up a finger and hushed them. He was on no ceremony with these children, as he had taught them to ride, just as he had their father.

The twins watched as he started off towards the stud paddock, calling their prize stallion’s name as he moved in that direction. “Frenchy! Eh, son, settle down.”

* * *

Bromley Grange was certainly an impressive estate. Its lands were extensive and its parks neatly groomed, but it was not the extent of its landscape that caught Cherry’s full interest. She pressed her face to the coach window and exclaimed as she surveyed paddock after paddock of horses ... beautiful horses!

“Mr. Trekner! You never mentioned that Bromley Grange was a breeding farm. Why, look at those mares ... *stunning!*”

“Yes, indeed. The estate brings in a handsome income from the animals.”

“Stud paddocks must be in the back ...” Cherry mused out loud.

“That’s right. Like horses, do you?”

“Oh yes, and I hated having to leave mine with Polly ... Miss Corbett, but I thought it best for the time being.” She knew anyone looking over her prime blood would know its cost and certainly not believe she had to work for a living. “Horses,” she added, “are a passion of mine.”

Cherry felt a twinge of shame that she had to keep up the pretense of her real identity, but she rationalized that she had no choice. She eyed Mr. Trekner fondly. They had enjoyed a lively conversation, and she had found him warm-hearted and fatherly and was totally comfortable with him, enough to ask, “How many studs do they put up here?”

“Knowing, aren’t you, Miss Parker? I am fairly certain there are a few, but only one that draws in the major fees, and that is French Connection.”

Cherry’s mouth dropped, and she exclaimed, “Never say so! Why he took more races last year than—”

“Quite so,” Mr. Trekner cut in, himself apparently a horseman. “Ah, that’s right, and Bold and Fancy is the other well-known stud.”

“Why, this is beyond everything famous!” Cherry clapped her hands. “Oh look ... their stables are superb. May we stop for just a moment before we go up to the house?”

He was no doubt anxious to find the twins and introduce them to their new nanny but kindly sighed and said, "I can't see how a short stop will do any harm, and it will be good to stretch my legs." He took his cane and pounded at the driver's wall, calling the man to halt the coach.

Cherry nimbly alighted from the carriage and watched as Mr. Trekner followed, but when they reached the entrance of the stables, she heard something that made her hurry ahead.

Rushing down the dimly lit corridor of the barn to the double-wide opening at the far end, she came to one of the stud paddocks, where a magnificent bay stallion with all the room he needed had still managed to 'cast' himself in a corner between gate and rail fence line of his paddock. *Oh, you silly thing! You have all that room in which to lie down, and you still managed to find a way to get stuck so you can't stand back up! And unlike some well-behaved horses I know, she mentally berated him, you aren't dealing with it calmly at all.* In fact, he was groaning and thrashing his legs and was in danger of hurting himself. He let out a kick in desperation and cut himself against the wood railing.

A groom attempting to get near enough to kick out the rail was speaking softly to the stallion. Two children were wringing their hands. Every time the groom attempted to get close enough to knock out the railing with a sledgehammer, flying hooves kept him from his effort.

Cherry didn't speak as she turned and found the tack room, ran in, and grabbed two lunge lines.

Mouth agape, Mr. Trekner stood to one side as she sped past and went to the groom, saying, "Here, take this. Sling it round his front leg. I'll get his rear, and we'll get him over!"

"Aye, good girl!" the older groom agreed. "But we still may need to get this rail out of Frenchy's way."

"Right, but first we might be able to move him a bit, Mr. er ..."

"Thomas, miss, no 'mister' needed."

They worked as a team and managed, without getting kicked, to get the lines around first the front leg and then the rear. Cherry looked towards the two children and called them to her. "Come on, loves, get behind me and pull me as I pull."

Grunting and moaning, the three pulled and in fact did manage to get him nearly over, but not quite as he was tired from his thrashing and collapsed back into his corner.

However, they had managed to move him sufficiently so Thomas was able to get close enough to remove the offending railings. This done, they attended Frenchy, who had managed to get on his back—rolling from side to side as he instinctively was aware of what he needed to get out of the trap he found himself in. With a winded groan, Frenchy finally rolled to one side and with a snort scrambled to stand. He blew out as he recouped his strength and regarded his rescuers.

Thomas shook his head and eyed Cherry. “Thankee, miss. That was well done.”

She smiled. “However did such a brute find himself cast in this large paddock?”

Thomas grinned. “See that mud in the corner? Frenchy likes to roll in mud, and Oi’m thinking that was what he did and cast himself.” He tipped his hat at her. “Oi’ll be looking at his legs now. Good thing ye were ’ere—all m’lads are out and about this morning.”

Cherry turned to the two children and touched their shoulders. “Well, and thank you. I didn’t have the weight to manage that without your help.”

They both blushed with pleasure, but this was short-lived as Mr. Trekner broke the spell of the moment with reality, saying, “Well, well, Felix, Francine. Come, we will all ride up to the house together. How nice that you are here to welcome your new governess.”

Cherry felt her heart sink when she witnessed their wide smiles simply vanish. She could have kicked Mr. Trekner in that moment. She had been nearly certain the two children were her future charges, and she wished that introduction had come only after she had been able to converse with them a few moments. However, there was nothing for it ... the moment of truth had come.

Well, some truth.

~ Eight ~

SKYLER WESTBROOKE SAT back against his high-backed leather upholstered desk chair and surveyed the stout, prune-faced man standing before him. Trouble here, he thought as he smiled and indicated the chair at his side.

“Do be seated, Dr. Hendricks, and tell me what brings you here.” It was cordially said, but there was that touch of reserve, that warning in his voice that kept people just a bit wary of him. Dr. Hendricks was no exception and tempered his words as he took up the chair and looked at Skyler ‘man to man’.

“Your brother ... half-brother, I know, is the subject of my visit.”

“Indeed, how so?”

Sky’s brows were mobile, and his blue eyes were sharp as Dr. Hendrick said, “His behavior, my lord, is next to unpardonable, and what makes it worse is his cavalier attitude. Most young men raise a fuss now and then—did so myself—but when caught, exhibit ... feel a sense of remorse. I do not see that in him—quite the opposite. He doesn’t seem to care that he was sent down ... makes no—”

“Sent down?” Sky cut in sharply as he sat forward.

“Ah, so it matters to you. I was beginning to wonder.”

“Matters? Of course it matters! What the devil are you talking about, man?” Sky was now impatient for an explanation.

Dr. Hendricks shrank back against his chair, obviously concerned his remark had over-stepped, but he still plodded forward. “The truth is I like young Freddy Bromley and have thought all he needed was a strong hand.” He paused, searched Sky’s face, and then continued. “We have had a few talks ... or I have talked, and he has only responded with shrugs and simple responses.” He sighed and then added, “I still think he could succeed if he manages to control his rebellion and apply himself.”

“Why was I not told?” Sky stood up and went to his window, where he clasped his hands behind his back and then turned back to his guest. “I should have been told.”

“But ... I have written to you on two occasions.”

“Wrote to me? I never received any letters from you, Dr. Hendricks.” Sky frowned as he puzzled over this. “To where were they addressed?”

“I had them franked to Bromley Grange, and the thing is ... when I was

there and inquired about those letters, it seems the Bromley servants held them at Bromley for you, thinking perhaps you were due to stop in and see your young—”

Sky heard the censure in his voice and cut him short. He was beyond the age where he flushed; however, he did so now. The twins. He had not seen them in months. His behavior was deplorable. He turned back to gazing out his window for a long moment before returning to sit with Hendricks. He said softly, “I am not often at Bromley.”

“So I was given to understand. The thing is ... Freddy should have been there by now, but when I arrived there yesterday afternoon, he had not yet been received. What is more, those twins of yours seem to run wild about the place. When I inquired after them, I was told your man went off to fetch their new governess.”

Skyler silently berated himself. He had neglected his family in pursuit of politics and revelry. However, this caught his attention. “New governess? I had thought he had quite run through the gamut of suitable women willing to take charge of those monkeys.”

“I don’t know anything else ... but—”

Once again Sky interrupted. "Tell me, sir, if you will, was Freddy's offense such that he will not be allowed to return to school?"

Dr. Hendricks shook his head. "Thank the saints, that is not so—however, such a possibility could occur in the future if he does not settle down and apply himself to his studies instead of the frivolous larks he seems to embark upon every other day."

"Thank you." Sky got to his feet once more and after a moment's pacing turned back to his desk, picked up a quill, and jotted something down hurriedly. "Do stay, Dr. Hendricks, and enjoy some refreshments. I shall have them sent in to you, but I know you will forgive me for not staying to bear you company. It seems I have been remiss in my own behavior, and Freddy's cavalier attitude stems from my own." He walked abruptly to the door and stood there while adding, "I mean to handle the situation immediately."

"You leave for Bromley?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"My lord, I would so appreciate it if you would send me word. I leave for Eton in the morning and would like to hear that your chap is under your direction."

"Done ... and thank you for your genuine concern." With that Sky Westbrooke was out the door and taking up his greatcoat. He had to get to Bromley and see to his miscreant brother!

~ Nine ~

“RIGHT,” CHERRY SAID out loud and to no one in particular as she walked with determined steps back into the library and looked at the twins. She had just seen Mr. Trekner off, and here was the moment. She was going to have to win the two over, and she rather thought she knew the way. She directed a look at them and smiled. “I have a fancy to learn about Bromley. What say you if we take to horse and you take me under your wing and teach me about your beautiful home?”

The twins eyed one another with open stupefaction. Here was something new; it was obvious they didn’t know what to make of her.

“Eh?” Felix said doubtfully.

“Oh ... I am sorry, Felix ... can’t you and your sister ride?” It was a taunt, though a gentle one.

“Of course we can ride!” Felix’s chin was well up.

“Then, would you like to?”

“Yes ... well ... I mean ...” Felix stumbled over himself.

His sister picked up the slack. “But do you have a riding habit? None of our other governesses ever did.” Francine cast a practical eye over Cherry.

“Ah, there is the rub,” Cherry answered cheerfully. “Do you think you will be ashamed of me if I hop up as I am?” She was wearing her simple dark blue traveling gown, but she had on her half boots, which she had worn the night she rode out on Bessy. “And ...” She made a show of sighing. “I suppose I shall have to ride a lady’s saddle, though I would rather ride astride.”

“Ride astride?” Felix squealed in astonishment. “Girls can’t ride astride.”

“Oh, but they can, and I do very often—however, I suppose the proprieties must be observed now that I am a governess, and so I will cave in and ride a lady’s saddle.” She smiled amiably at both of them.

“Is this the first time you were hired as a governess?” Francine asked in some awe.

“It is,” Cherry answered with a clap of her hands. “So you must help me, you see, and tell me when I do something very wrong, for I understand you two have experience with these things.”

Felix and Francine eyed one another again, and Felix tugged his sister’s skirt as Cherry moved off to look out the window.

“Nightmare ... this is a nightmare,” he whispered.

"I think she is wonderful," Francine said dreamily.

"Exactly!"

Cherry had heard every word, but she did not allow them to see that as she turned back to them and said brightly, "Well then, is it agreed? Shall we ride?"

Felix was made of stern stuff and put on a frown as he said, "Come on then, let's not take all day about it." With that he led the way.

"Right," Cherry said with a soft smile as she took Francine's ready little hand and followed.

* * *

Freddy Bromley was seventeen. He was fair, tall, lean, and up to every rig. He was mischievous and full with his need for adventure. He was also the firstborn Bromley male and therefore held the title.

His young lordship had over the last year acquired a sense of self and felt he had no one but himself to answer to, with the exception of his older half-brother, whom he adored.

For as far back as he could remember he held Sky as the standard for all men. However, Sky was hardly ever at Bromley, and although he made excuses for his older brother's absence, Freddy missed him sorely and would have liked to discuss with him any number of items that plagued his mind.

Now, he was in the suds. Disgraced and sent home of all things—and he knew Skyler would not be happy about this. He was more than a little concerned, and thus he assumed false bravado with a shrug of his shoulders and made his leisurely way home. He stopped along the way to dally with various sporting (if older) gentlemen that he met at the inn where he put up for the night.

At any rate, he was fairly certain that Sky would not be at Bromley and therefore would not yet be apprised of his present predicament. When he arrived at his home he stopped first at the stables, where Tom gave him a hearty greeting and took his horse in tow as they chatted.

Mixed feeling assaulted him when he learned his brother was indeed still in London. Something stronger than the fear of censure took hold, and he had a great desire to see Sky and confess all ...

However, this apparently was not to be, and he arrived at his front door to be met by his old friend and butler, Thurston, whom he heartily greeted and managed to make smile in spite of his calling.

"Where are the little brats?" he inquired affectionately of the twins.

"Off riding with their new governess."

"New governess—riding? Why ... I never heard of such a thing." Freddy's eyes opened wide, and his fair brows were high. "We have nothing in our stables suitable for a prim old governess."

"Well, as to that, Miss Parker is neither prim or old. In fact, she is not quite like any of the other governesses the children have had in the past,

m'lord."

"Is she not? Well ... perhaps I'll just go and have a look for m'self," young Freddy announced with keen interest and curiosity in his light eyes.

* * *

Prancer was a dark bay with a white blaze and two white stockings. He was a fine-looking piece of horseflesh, and he was true to his name. Cherry, however, was up to his high-stepping friskiness and soon fell in love with him. He was spirited and sleek, and she enjoyed his gait. The children had warned her when she first said she would ride him, but she ignored their dire predications and had nimbly mounted him. Very soon her strong seat and gentle hands won him over.

The children watched her handle him, eyes wide open as he at first pranced about. They advised her that their sister Mary had never liked him and that he had not been ridden in a year.

Cherry laughed. "Then we shall not go far until I'm sure he is fit enough."

The twins mounted their ponies, and Felix said to Cherry, in spite of the fact that he had just told his sister they had to get rid of this governess before she took over everything, "You are a 'right one, Miss Parker ... I'll give you that."

They had a wonderful ride together, chatting about the grounds, their lessons, or neglect thereof, and their oldest brother. Apparently, they viewed him as a god that had too many other duties and responsibilities to visit often, and that made Cherry frown and form an immediate, poor opinion.

As they returned to the stables, Cherry teased Felix and asked, "Well then, what do you think of Prancer now?"

"He needs refinement, but ..." He grinned widely. "That is what Freddy says."

"And Freddy is ...?" Cherry eyed him. She knew, but she wanted to keep him talking and learn the family dynamics.

"My brother and Lord of Bromley—don't you know anything?"

"No ..." Cherry sighed. "That is why you must teach me."

Felix laughed and added, "Freddy likes Prancer—rode him when he was here, but m'brother rides all hell bent ... at least that's what he says ..." He blushed suddenly and looked away.

"You have an eye for horses ... I can see that." Cherry smiled at him.

He puffed up proudly, and his sister stuck in, "Oh yes ... he does. I think he will help Freddy run Bromley beautifully when he is of age."

"And you have an older sister too, don't you—Mary?" Cherry asked, keeping the dialogue going.

"She is at boarding school. She is fourteen and very pretty, though I must say nothing next to you ..." stuck in Felix, who then blushed to the roots of his fair hair.

Cherry laughed, but this was short lived as Felix shrugged, turned to his

sister, and said, "This isn't going to work ... she's too pretty. We'll just start to like her, and she'll run off to get married, and we'll be alone again."

"Stop it, Felix," Francine grumbled at him.

"Well, I don't want her here ..."

"Ah, then I probably won't last. I don't like to stay where I am not wanted. It is a dreadful feeling," Cherry said softly.

Francine objected. "We want you ..." She turned to her brother. "Don't we, Felix?"

Felix glanced at Cherry and said gruffly, "No matter what we want. When my brother Sky has a look at you ... out you'll go."

Francine sighed heavily over this. "Felix has a point there, you know. Our brother is older than you and will not think you are old enough to take care of us. We know because he is always getting in these old women to nanny us. He will say—" She cut herself off as something caught her eye in the distance. "Felix ... look there—'tis Freddy!" She then shrieked like a hoyden, "Freddy! Freddy!" and stood in her stirrups to wave in the air before putting her pony into a run.

The sudden movement spooked Prancer so that he hopped a rear and attempted to take off as well. Cherry worked her reins, cursed her sidesaddle, and sat him well enough to catch hold of him. The effort took her breath away and accentuated her youthful vitality so that Freddy's first vision of Cheryl sent him reeling into infatuation.

"Freddy," Francine repeated as she jumped off her pony and flung herself into her brother's ready arms.

"Hallo, brat." He gave her a squeeze and looked up to find Felix standing before him. "And you, little man!"

Felix seemed to take this as an invitation, and it was with great affection that he held out his hand in greeting. "Freddy ... so good ... so good to have you home ..." With that he dropped his attempt at maturity and dove at his brother to hug him around his waist.

Cherry dismounted and led Prancer by his reins towards the happy reunion while Freddy tickled his siblings and demanded an introduction.

Francine beamed and said, "Miss Sarah Parker, our new governess, Freddy," She clasped his hand tightly and smiled up at him. "Miss Parker ... our brother, Lord Frederick of Bromley."

"Nicely done," Cherry said and affectionately touched Francine's ear before meeting young Bromley's already fascinated gaze and offering her hand. "I am so pleased to meet you, my lord."

Instead of shaking her hand, he clipped his heels together and bent over her fingers, and Cheryl almost laughed. She did not, however, and contemplated him somberly until Francine asked innocently, "Freddy, since you are home, does that mean that Miss Parker is your governess as well?"

Freddy laughed out loud and ruffled her fair curls. "No, m'girl ... I am too old for a governess." He turned to Cherry and nodded towards Prancer. "You

handle him well—I was never really able to get Mary to ride him, and he doesn't seem to like men."

"He certainly is full of spirit, but I think all he needs is consistent work." She smiled back at Freddy. "Tell me, my lord, if you would, how do you happen to be home from Eton so early in the season?"

"Zounds—you do come to the point!" He chuckled and then met her gaze steadily. "I was sent home in disgrace."

"Were you?" Cherry responded thoughtfully and then added, "How very exciting. What did you do—let a monkey loose in the dining hall?"

He laughed. "Egad! What a wonderful notion. No, far more common than that. I was caught climbing through my window ... after hours."

She eyed him a moment. "Well, that is breaking the rules to be sure, but one doesn't usually get sent home—"

He cut her off. "For the third time and after a very severe warning. Dr. Hendricks is a right 'un, but he didn't have a choice."

"Freddy ..." Felix shook his head in some disgust. "How could you get caught three times?"

This set off a round of laughter and teasing, and then Cherry asked, "Seriously ...?"

"Aye." Freddy sighed at that. "But when one considers that three out of perhaps ten or twelve nightly excursions in one month, one doesn't feel so badly." A broad grin covered his adorable face.

Felix touched his brother's arm and pronounced him to be a 'complete hand'.

"Now just a moment, gentlemen." This surprised her, for she had during her London season become such a prankster. "Although we have had a bit of a laugh, we must consider that getting oneself expelled is not what a Bromley owes himself or his name." Her tone was firm yet gentle as she eyed Freddy a warning and then Felix.

Felix found the ground fascinating and could not tear his gaze away as Freddy leveled a look at Cherry and apparently decided that anything she said was perfectly right with him. "Point taken, Miss Parker, but I can't regret it, for if I hadn't gotten caught and been sent down, I wouldn't be here now ... with you ..."

"Aw, Freddy ..." Felix complained as he watched his brother fall into infatuation.

"I am famished," Francine announced, "and it is time for tea!"

~ Ten ~

“HERE, LET ME help you with that,” Freddy said solicitously as he jumped to assist Cheryl in moving the children’s writing table across the room.

She allowed him to do so and stepped back to view this handiwork thoughtfully. “That’s better,” she pronounced with some satisfaction, and then to the twins asked, “Don’t you think?”

Felix eyed the desk with the sun streaming in from the window, open books reposing invitingly on the desk, and shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose,” he conceded.

“Felix ...” his sister said, shaking her head. “It is much, much better than being stuck in that dreary corner.” She turned to Cherry and added, “Our other governesses were afraid we would look out the window and not pay attention.”

“There is that.” Cherry laughed. “But I hope to make the lessons interesting enough that you will concentrate ... most of the time.”

That drew even a reluctant grin from Felix, who then said, “You know, exercise is very important as well ...”

“Yes,” agreed his sister.

“What did you have in mind?” Cherry allowed with a rueful smile.

“The pond ... could we please go see the ducklings before the day is lost ... please, Miss Parker?”

“Very well, ducklings are very good teachers ... so, yes, to the pond.”

Felix eyed her suspiciously and said under his breath, “Wonder when she means to drop the hammer? Francie, this one is too good to be true.”

His sister ignored him—as did Cherry, who had heard every word. She sent them off to fetch their coats while she took up her cream-colored shawl.

“You will like the pond ... it has a very pretty setting ...” Freddy said as he looked at Cherry dreamily.

“Yes, there is a great deal that can be learned at a pond. We can manage two birds with one stone, as the saying goes.” Cherry laughed at Freddy’s expression and waved him off. “Go on ... you go and fetch the biscuits for the ducks and meet us outside.”

“*At once*,” he answered dramatically and was off, happy to be of service. It was all too obvious to Cherry that he was infatuated with her; she would have to be careful and steer him off by reminding him every time she could

that she was older and not suitable.

The walk to the pond was done with everyone conversing in French. Cherry made a game of it, starting it with a song and then presenting the simplest of questions, requiring only a basic answer in the French tongue. Even Felix became quite enthralled with the game. By the time they had reached the pond, she had started a short story, embellishing it with romance, keeping it simple enough for them to understand, sticking in a word of English here and there to help them along, ending it with the promise to continue it the next day when they had learned additional French vocabulary.

They stopped to view the pond, and Cherry exclaimed, "Why it is certainly everything you said, Freddy. Quite exceptional ... lovely."

"Look!" Felix shrieked and took after something in a great rush.

"Oh no!" Francine wailed. "He'll catch it and shake it in my face."

"What will he shake in your face?" Cherry smiled, greatly amused, and then went wide-eyed as Felix had indeed caught something he was stroking in his hand.

"It's a frog ... only look how big he is!" Felix announced as he approached them.

Francine dove behind Cherry as Felix held it up to Cherry's face for inspection with great enthusiasm.

Cherry laughed and shook her head. "No, not a frog." She reached out and petted the creature to Felix's amazement and Francine's horror. "At least not just any frog, but a bullfrog, Felix."

Freddy, who had been grinning broadly during this entire interlude, burst into indecent mirth and said to his young brother, "She has you at every score, young'un."

Felix's mouth opened and shut. Finally he said, "A bullfrog?" He eyed her suspiciously. "How do you know?"

"Why, just by his size. He will live for about fifteen years, you know." She smiled to see him look at her oddly before he set the creature down and stood back to watch it hop off to safety.

Cherry was breaking down all of Felix's defenses, and at the moment he was at a loss. Just how did one react to such a governess?

* * *

Sky Westbrooke strode hard through the front door and handed the butler his driving coat, gloves, and hat. He smiled amicably at the man, and inquired carefully, "Tell me, Thurston, has my brother Frederick been heard from?"

"Why, yes, my lord. He arrived yesterday."

"Did he, by God! Well, that is something. Where is he presently?"

"He is with the children and the new governess, my lord."

"New governess? Will wonders never cease—good for ol' Trekner! What sort of woman is she, Thurston? How is she holding up?"

"I must say, my lord, she is unlike any governess we have had here

before. As to the children ... we believe they already are taking to her ... but of course, she has only been here since yesterday.” In an aside with a slight smile, he added, “Felix seems taken with her.”

“Will wonders never cease? Where are they now?” His lordship was intrigued.

“At the pond, my lord, er ... feeding the ducks.”

Both men suddenly turned to look at the front door, which opened with a bang and an accompaniment of laughter and shrieking children.

His lordship’s eyes opened wide as he watched Freddy step aside to allow ‘Miss Sarah’, as he called her, to enter, her shawl full with a crew of wriggling yellow fluffs.

Behind the new governess came Francine, squealing with delight and interjecting, “Be careful, oh, Miss Sarah ... one is escaping!” So stating, she grabbed at the shawl where one little duckling had managed to stick out its head and held it together.

Cherry, however, had been struck into such immobility that all she could do was stare at the tall and arresting man before her. Both Cherry and Westbrooke took a long gulp of air at finding one another so unexpectedly.

What is he doing here? she immediately wondered. Faith, but he was (as she had thought a few nights ago) the most handsome man she had ever seen, and how very exciting to see him again. What a night that had been ... when he ushered her into his coach and took her to Polly Corbett’s. It all came flooding back to her, and she felt the heat rush to her cheeks. He had kissed her ... and that kiss ... oh, that kiss.

She had let him kiss her ... more than once.

What was he doing here? Why did he walk about like he belonged ...?

Francine squealed when she saw her eldest brother, but she first took the shawl with all the ducklings away from Cherry and put them into Thurston’s hands. “Dear Thurston, take them please to the kitchen.”

“Yes, but Cook...she won’t like it...”

Thurston looked dazed for the first time since Cherry had met him, and she laughed. “I noticed a pen right off the kitchen—you can put them there until we figure out how to care for them.”

“Yes, please, Thurston—they are orphans...” added Francine.

Thurston did not express by facial or word his displeasure but scooped up the ducklings and said only, “Yes, Miss Francine ... don’t worry, I shall take care of them until you can get back to them.”

She then turned and threw herself at Lord Westbrooke with pure joy taking over her face, as did her twin brother behind her, and she exclaimed, “Sky! Sky!”

Her twin offered his hand but was pulled into his lordship’s body for a bear hug.

“Come then, monkeys. We have some catching up to do.” Over their pale gold heads he looked sternly at Frederick and said, “You and I will talk

presently, so I trust you will await me in the library.” He didn’t need a reply, for his tone was such that none would oppose him, and yet he received one.

“And greetings to you as well, brother,” Freddy said with some bravado it was fairly obvious he was far from feeling.

His lordship’s eyebrow rose, but he thought better of the retort that sprang to mind and then turned on Cherry, to say in stern accents, “Miss Parker, you and I must have an interview ... one that should have taken place before, in fact, you were installed here at Bromley.”

“Yes, but ... Sky, is it? I don’t know how it is, but you look like a Justin to me.” Cherry caught the giggle in her throat. He had been bosky with drink, yes, but not so much that he hadn’t tried to hide his identity from her. She couldn’t blame him; in fact, it was all so amusing.

She felt the mischief work its way through her and was sure he would see the laughter in her bright eyes as she said, “Indeed, I look forward to it, though you seem a touch sterner by the light of day ...” Her voice trailed off on this last and did indeed take on the hint of a giggle as she gave him her back and started to move off to the kitchen. However, his voice at her back stalled her, and she turned around. “What, my lord?”

He bowed stiffly. “My middle name is Justin, and what I said was that such levity of mind is not becoming in a governess.”

“Is it not? How odd that you should think so. I have always found levity, in anyone, a becoming trait.” So saying, she gurgled and continued on her way.

Frederick waited for him to leave and rolled his eyes as he rushed to catch up to Cherry. He snorted. “You seem to have put him off balance. Well done, Miss Sarah, well done.”

“I think, however, that we are in for it.” Cherry laughed. Who would have thought she would end up being a governess in the house of a rogue and one that had kissed her only a few nights back? Thank goodness he didn’t know her real name!

* * *

Sky Westbrooke was in a quandary. What should he do? Walking to the study, Francine had tucked her hand in his, sighed happily, and said, “Sky ... isn’t she wonderful.” It obviously was not a question as she added, “We have been having so much fun.”

“A governess is not supposed to be fun—she is supposed to look after you and provide you with an education,” he started gruffly.

“Can’t she be fun and still do all that?” Francine argued.

“No ... it is unheard of ...” His lordship frowned as he was reminded of a professor at school who had got him interested in ancient history simply because he had made it entertaining.

“You know, though, Sky,” Felix interjected, “she took us to the pond, which was fun, but then she taught us a great deal about the vegetations and

the frogs ... and ...”

“So then you are of a like mind ... and are happy to have her here at Bromley?” Sky asked. It would be a first since their mother had died. In fact, he had never seen them so bright and happy since that day.

Felix grumbled. “Well, she is better than any of the others Trekner sent us, I’ll say that much.”

“Is she, indeed?” returned Skyler, frowning darkly. This might prove a problem. “Well, we shall watch her and see ...”

~ Eleven ~

THE INTERVIEW HIS lordship had so ominously promised came twenty minutes before the dinner hour at Bromley. Cherry was just fussing over the only other dress she had brought into the country with her. It was a simple thing of dark blue silk and showed to advantage her provocative lines.

It was not at all suitable for a governess, though its scoop neckline was not as deeply cut as most of her other gowns at home. What to do? Brave it out. What else could she do? She braced herself and made her way below-stairs and to the library.

She had asked Francine to find her a shawl, and the child had gladly brought her one of her sister Mary's—a very finely knit off-white shawl that she slung around her shoulders, hoping it would tone down the sensuality of her gown.

Thurston opened the library door for her as he had been instructed and gently announced her presence before he quietly withdrew and closed the door after him. Cherry folded her hands together and let them rest at her waist as she met his lordship's gaze. What eyes he had ... deep, dark blue like the ocean ...

Even in the dim light they seemed to glitter. How sensuous were his lips ... those lips that had so recently kissed her. What was he thinking?

"Well, and though you look ..." His gaze swept over her, lingering over her full breasts and then over her nipples protruding through the silk. "... ravishing, you do not look the part you presently play."

"Nevertheless, I think I can play it," she answered immediately.

"And is that what you are doing—playing a part?" He had moved closer to her, and as she stepped back, her shawl fell and was only held in place by her bent arms. Their eyes met.

"Isn't that something we all do from time to time?" she answered. She was enjoying herself immensely. Three London seasons had taught her self-assurance and how to conduct a lively banter.

"Don't play at semantics with me. I want answers now," he returned sharply.

"Do you? Then, you must give me the questions." She was pert and just a touch annoyed. What if she had to make her way through life as a governess and be subject to this sort of thing simply because she was young and attractive? Her eyes challenged him.

He looked her over once more, and she felt his attraction seep through his attitude; however, he frowned at her. "Right then, have a seat, and I will put those questions to you."

She took up the ladies' chair near the fire and folded her hands in her lap, demurely waiting. He came to tower over her but decided instead to pull up a chair and place it near her so that he was facing her.

"Right then, I shall come to the point. When we met, you were fleeing London, for reasons of your own, and going to your nanny..." He hesitated, and she immediately urged him on.

"Yes ...?"

"I suppose you did not then know you were to take on a position of governess?"

"No. I only knew I had to get to Polly," she answered softly. As many truths as she could give him, she decided. It was so difficult to remember lies.

"How then did you come to be at Bromley?"

"Your man, Mr. Trekner, came to enlist my Polly to be governess to the twins. She could not oblige, but I could," Cherry answered simply.

"Hold old did you say you were?"

"I am one and twenty," she answered easily

"You don't look it. Why, you look—" he started.

"Old enough to kiss," she stuck in. Eyeing him naughtily, she felt an excitement she had never felt before. Here was the man she had been dreaming about ever since he had kissed her.

She had shocked him silent, but he recovered. "That was quite different!"

"Was it?" She tilted her pretty head. "Explain, my lord ... in what way was it different then?"

"Never mind." He waved it off testily.

"Right, my age, then, is no longer in question," she returned promptly. "What then is?"

"Your experience," he retorted in a superior tone, thinking he had her now.

"Ah, I must say, I have none. I have had an extensive education, however, and I do so like children, but if you feel that perhaps you need someone else, someone with experience, well then, I shall leave."

She had called him out, and now she was surprised to find her heart so very afraid of what he might do.

* * *

She had called him to action—and therein lay the problem. The children seemed to like her, and they needed a governess. He simply could not leave them to the servants, who weren't equipped to give them lessons.

However, how could he have her underfoot ... looking as she did? He had thought of little else since he had dropped her off at Miss Corbett's. He was a grown man and damn well in control of his dick, which he did not allow to

lead him about ... but this one stirred his loins.

He would have to let her stay on for now.

He shouldn't stay at Bromley long—rumors would fly—and he would have to do something about her wardrobe. Her clothes were not suitable for a governess. Damn, but he rather thought she would be seductive in burlap. He was going to have to keep his distance from the minx.

"No, I don't think you should leave, but we have to establish some ground rules."

"Such as?"

"Appropriate attire, for one. You will go into town as soon as you can and charge some gowns more in keeping with your station." He felt the frown on his face and tried to dispense with it, but then his eyes strayed to her breasts, up her neckline to her beautiful face, and he felt momentarily at a loss to go on.

"Thank you. I shall do that. What other rules?"

"We will talk about the other rules at another time." He leaned into her and smiled suddenly. "The twins do like you, and I believe children do learn more from someone they can like and admire."

She started to her feet. "Thank you. If you will excuse me, I will go up to have dinner with them now."

"No, I asked them to have dinner with Freddy and me while I am here at Bromley, and there is no reason for you to eat alone. You shall of course, join us."

His eyes met her deep aqua blues, and he watched as her dark lashes swept her cheek shyly. It occurred to him that she was the most exquisite creature he had ever encountered.

* * *

Three mornings later, Cherry stood in the kitchen pleading her case with a large woman who was full of warmth and motherly tendencies. She was called 'Cook' by the staff and didn't seem to go by any other name.

"But, dear Cook ... they have no mother to care for them ... *poor little ducklings* ..."

"Look here, Miss Sarah. These things must go. They are forever escaping the crate I set up for them, making a mess in their water dish ... I jest don't have the time for them."

"But, Cook, the twins do so love them ... and it will be good for them to care for them and watch them grow. It is such a dangerous world out there for them ..."

"Still ... enough is enough ... I ..."

"I have it ... here just outside in the breezeway. I made a pen to keep them safe, and I put a large tin tub into the ground for them to swim in ... it will do until I can get Mr. Tom to build them a proper place!" Freddy announced, stepping into the kitchen from the back garden door.

Cherry clapped her hands together. She went to take Freddy's hands and saw him blush to the roots of his fair hair. "Freddy ... aren't you wonderful!"

At the wide doorway to the kitchen his lordship came to an abrupt halt. Cherry saw him out of the corner of her eye and wondered what was wrong, as he looked supremely irritated. Did he not like ducklings?

He stepped into the room and said, "What is all this about ducks?"

"The ducklings you must have noticed the day you first arrived ... in my shawl ... well, not really my shawl but Mary's, and I am terribly sorry but it must be ruined and I shall have to purchase her another—"

He put up a hand. "Let us return to the subject of ducks." His eyes strayed to his brother, who avoided his gaze, and then back to Cherry as she moved towards him.

"They are orphans and will die or be eaten if we leave them to fend for themselves." She wrung her hands together. "And Freddy here has constructed a temporary habitat for them."

He seemed to Cherry to size up the situation in quick degree as he turned to his brother and said, "Has he? I never knew you had an interest in ... building."

"Perhaps you have never taken the time to know very much about me." Freddy's tone was cold.

Cherry looked from brother to brother. She had assumed from their behavior at dinner Sky's first night home that their 'talk' had not gone well. She picked up the slack and drew the attention to herself. "The point being that they certainly shall not be underfoot, and it will be a wonderful situation for the children ..." She was all too aware that the moment he had arrived on the scene, her breath had departed her. She felt a certain dimness of mind and a sure heat of blood. She found herself staring into his dark blue eyes and discovered he was 'not' immune to her either.

"Very well ... since Frederick has gone to the trouble of building them a place where they will not be under Cook's feet ..."

She jumped with pleasure and took his two hands in hers. "Thank you, my lord ..." For a moment their eyes locked, and she was sure he felt the rush of desire that swept through her body. She was sure he wanted her, because his eyes filled with an expression her London seasons had taught her to understand, but this time, for the first time, she returned the look ...

Cook gathered the four ducklings into a basket and shoved the basket at Freddy. "There now ... in yer care they are."

Freddy took them and started for the door, turned back, and told Cherry, "I'll just get them settled in their new home. I have some grain there as well waiting for them."

"Oh Freddy, aren't you wonderful. You have thought of everything." Cherry beamed and turned back to his lordship, who had reached to touch her arm to regain her attention. It was like a bolt of lightening that sped through her—brought her to life, instead of striking her unconscious. She felt taken—

she felt connected, and then she saw that he felt it too.

He looked almost stunned, but he cleared his throat and said, "The twins—have you managed to get them ready?"

"Yes. They are only just out front playing hide and seek," she answered softly.

"Playing ... they shouldn't be playing and getting dirty when I asked you to have them ready to leave with me," he returned roughly.

"Yes, my lord." She smiled sweetly, though she wanted to kick him in the shins. "But it is nearly half past the hour, and you can't have two such lively children sitting on their thumbs if you are going to be so very late, which you are—so very late."

She had turned the matter around on him, and she could see he didn't like it. She could also see that his sense of fairness considered her words.

"I see," he answered and walked out of the kitchen to find the twins.

However, they had already come in search of him, and they appeared rosy-cheeked and out of breath, both of them smiling. He grinned. "Ready, monkeys?" He laughed and ruffled Felix's hair, and it was obvious he was genuinely pleased to find them so happy.

"Been ready, my lord brother." Francine giggled teasingly and went to take Cherry's hand. "You had better fetch your Spencer, though, Miss Sarah. It is brrr"—she hugged herself for emphasis—"cold outside."

Apparently Francine had adopted quite a motherly attitude in regards to her governess, who then felt the heat in her cheeks and said, "Oh no, love. This outing is for you and Felix." In her embarrassment, she had taken an unconscious step backward.

At dinner each night, his lordship had made a few attempts to make certain she understood she was no more than a servant. She watched the frown spread across his face, but then Felix added his plea as well. "Come then, Miss Sarah ... you will like it, I promise. Don't be missy and silly. We want you there, and so does Sky." He looked at his brother with a hint of encouragement both in his face and voice. "Don't you, Sky?"

"Yes, lad." His lordship smiled at Felix. "Miss Sarah, you are most welcome to join us."

Cherry did not believe he really wanted her to. He seemed so standoffish, so entirely different than the rogue who had taken her into his arms on the way to Polly's on her 'runaway' night. However, she actually did want to go with them and said brightly, "Thank you. You are most kind, my lord."

Freddy returned, and Francine ran to him, took his hand, and pulled him along, "We are going to the fair, Freddy, and you must join us." She eyed him knowingly and said, "There's a performing bear."

"Ah well, but I have seen performing bears ..."

"I'll just go fetch my cloak," Cherry stuck in as she started out.

"What, are you going to the fair as well?" Freddy inquired suddenly.

"Yes," she said, smiling at him.

“Indeed ... deuced entertaining, these performing bears. Think I will join, then,” Freddy said, smiling adoringly after her.

“We must not miss a chance to see a performing bear, must we, Freddy?” His lordship grinned.

Cherry looked over her shoulder and rescued him. “No ... who could ever resist such a treat? Not I.”

Freddy, still annoyed with his brother, looked across at him and mumbled something under his breath. Cherry was pleased that his lordship chose to ignore it.

~ Twelve ~

EVERY TIME THE children or Freddy called her Miss Sarah, Cherry cringed inside. It was her mother's names, both given and surname, that she was using. She hated the deception and made up her mind that at some opportune moment she would tell them the truth. She simply couldn't allow the situation to go on under false pretenses. However, she didn't want to leave just yet, for the children's sake, and therein lay the problem.

If his lordship found out—well, that would be quite another thing, for he would certainly send her off and back to her stepmama the instant she confessed, and that would hurt the children more than her. She had come to realize suddenly that her behavior was not only outrageous but had dire consequences that touched others as well as her. She was deeply ashamed of herself.

At some point, she would have to call an end to the charade. She hoped when she confessed all, she would return to a forgiving stepmama who would not try and force her into marriage, for that was something she would not accept, ever.

Time was not on her side. However, the children—everyone, actually—seemed to be enjoying the fair, and she decided to put off these decisions until another time.

The fair was a wonderful place of 'make believe' and a collection of all sorts of individuals bent on shopping for reasonable wares, quick and easy food, fortunetellers, and animals not often encountered in their daily lives.

The aromas of delicious pies wafted their way. Swings invited them to play, and every other booth displayed enchanting toys for sale—and they saw not one monkey, but two, and many eye-catching things to fascinate children and adults alike. Tents were set up, hawkers called out from their tables made of wooden crates while bakers held up their goods, and the twins were drawn to everything all at once.

A performing bear delighted them all and proved to be the highlight of the day when he stood and roared at the crowd. The excitement carried them all along, and even Freddy and his lordship began exchanging amiable quips and banter.

Francine suddenly pointed. "Sky, oh Sky ... sugar treats... please!"

Her brother smiled, flipped her a coin, and told the twins affectionately not to get lost.

A group of Freddy's cronies appeared and surrounded him, wanting to know when he had returned, and he was lost to them for the moment but called out to his older brother, "Take care of our treasure till I return, brother!"

Skyler grinned ruefully and called out, "Treasure, indeed," even as he put a hand to the back of Cherry's black velvet cloak and led her along.

She stopped and turned to look up at him. "That is very rude, but I daresay 'tis true that quality such as yourself might not think a member of the poorer class have any feelings." She was having a jolly good time and enjoyed the stricken look that covered his face.

He answered immediately. "I beg your pardon. I did not mean it as a slur. I was simply trying to bring my young brother to order. His ... *interest* in you is far too marked to be tolerable."

"For either of us, but I rather think his ... er interest, as you put it, is just that, and only for the moment. It will pass in due time."

"As to not thinking of the concerns of those less fortunate, you don't know me and cannot reasonably make such a statement, for it is blatantly untrue." He sighed. "And speaking of which, I must ask you to remember, Miss Sarah Parker, that I am not a fool. I don't know anything about your family, which by the way is extremely irregular, but I do know you did not spring from the unknown and mean streets of London." He put up a hand to stall her retort. "Are we clear on this?"

"Perhaps. We shall see." She avoided eye contact because she knew hers were alive with laughter. She could see she had made him uncomfortable, which was precisely what she wished to do.

"We shall see? Do you believe, really believe, I mistreat those less fortunate than I?" He shook his head. "I take exception to it ... and you, Miss Parker, you must admit to me, did not come from the 'poorer classes', so then, please do not pitch your gammon at me."

He's clever, and how neatly he turned that around. She said, "And yet, I am a governess."

"A mysterious one at that. Your speech, your walk, your manners and style denote your higher station, yet ..."

"Yet, I am a governess."

"I could say perhaps your family has fallen on hard times, but I already know you left them in the middle of the night—supposedly running away from your stepfather."

"Ah, I am surprised you remember that ... you seem to have forgotten other events of the evening." Again her eyes twinkled at him, and she could see a light of appreciation in his own dark blues.

He took her down an aisle between two tents and turned her, pulling her close to him. "Tell me, beauty ... clear up the mystery."

"No. I don't think so, my lord. You have been curt to me—that is when you are not ignoring me as you did last night at dinner. All that should matter

to you is that I have already grown very fond of the twins, and they are responding to me and my teaching methods. If I had been old, dowdy, and with less youth and more experience, you might have been kinder to me, for I do see the way you behave with your servants. You are not judging me on my merits, my lord, but on my looks. Tell me ..." Cherry decided to continue berating him and get it out of her system, for it had occurred to her that life could be very difficult for a penniless young woman endowed with good looks. "Yes, tell me, what a young woman with some countenance is to do in this world? Must she always sell herself because men like you think she isn't fit for anything but a bed? That is unfair and cruel. Why should I confide anything about myself to you?"

He was taken aback. He took her arm and brought her into himself. "Miss Sarah, you are forgetting our first meeting and what influence that had over me!"

"I am not forgetting that. I am not forgetting your delightful kisses that night, and I am not forgetting your willingness to deliver me to my ... to Polly." She hurried on. "You were—even in your state of fuzziness—most gallant, for you did manage to leave me nearly untouched. I trusted you then and thought you kind ... now I am not so certain."

Why her words inspired him to take her in his arms and repeat his performance of that night, she didn't know and didn't care. She felt herself melt against him as he murmured, "Beauty ... sweet delicious beauty ..." when he came away from that kiss and then took another.

When his hand traveled beneath her cloak and cupped her breast, she knew she was in trouble. She wanted this outrageous man who dared touch her so intimately. Why wasn't she stopping him? She should stop him ...

"Sarah ... can't you see? You must know how I feel. Forgotten the other night? It is all I have been thinking about. I am nearly mad with thinking about it. You are on my thoughts constantly ... and perhaps I have been regretting leaving you ... *untouched*."

For once, Cherry was at a loss for words. She was in trouble, because the thought of him making love to her even there behind the tent was sweetly, devilishly enticing.

What was wrong with her? Her heart was in control of her mind, and he seemed to be in control of her body. She didn't want him to leave her untouched. She wanted him in every imaginable way. She remembered her talks with the girls at school when some would sneak out at night to meet the local boys and how they had described their experience. *Faith*—she was one and twenty and wanted that experience!

Perhaps it was in that moment that she made up her mind. She was going to do whatever it took to make him feel about her the way she felt about him. She pressed herself up against him while his tongue withdrew and he nibbled at her lips and then her neck. She tried to get control of herself and said, "This is wrong ... I am governess to the twins ..."

He stopped immediately and whispered, "Of course ... someone might witness ... forgive me, beauty."

"Witness us ..." What was it in his tone that so annoyed her—his fear of being caught with his governess? She eyed him coldly and continued, "doing what, my lord ... *what you do so well?* Seducing whom you choose ...?" She felt a biting anger take hold of her.

"Sarah ..." he reproved and then offered her his arm. "Shall we look for the twins, then, Miss Sarah?" And his entire demeanor changed as he led her along and she seethed in silence.

* * *

His lordship looked out his library window to the rose garden where the new governess sat on the stone bench with his brother Freddy, and he frowned. They seemed deep in conversation. Sky lusted for her, he knew, but something else was behind it all, something he couldn't name. He liked her ... a great deal. In fact, he had a difficult time not smiling every time she came into a room or he heard her laughing with the children.

She tickled his sense of who he was and what he owed his family name, but for a moment at the fair the previous day when he had her in his arms he wondered why he had proposed to a stranger and wished he had not. He sighed heavily over the problem; that way of thinking would lead to trouble, and he had to be strong and shut it down. Yet—everything about her made him wild with emotions he hadn't felt since he was a pup in school.

Last year, when he had thought himself really taken with Olivia, one of his own class, he soon learned that she had duped him with false attentions. She had wanted him all right—she wanted his status and his wealth—and he had been hurt. However, what he felt for her couldn't have been real; he had certainly never experienced what coursed through him now. He simply was out of control. When Sarah wasn't in his sight, he was thinking about her. When she was in his sight, he had a hard-on that called her name and made him want to lay her down and ...

He was fevered for the aqua-eyed beauty. She was a minx. She was wild to a fault, totally unsuitable as a governess: her gowns, unsuitable; her quixotic behavior, unsuitable. And damn, when he had kissed her and found the fullness of her breast, he almost taken her there ... and then.

He had a vision of her lying back against the green grass, naked ... and his dick had screamed for her. He had been so hard he felt like he could have put it through a brick wall ...

What was happening to him? All he could think about was shoving his hard-on deep inside her and making her his. *She was his!* It suddenly occurred to him that he couldn't allow any other man to have her. What was wrong with him? Where had that come from?

Her every movement caught his eyes. Her voice traveled through his mind, sweetly obliterating all other thoughts. Her figure tantalized him. He

had never encountered such a beauty ... a beauty in all things.

He had to find a way to control himself, and *hell and brimstone*, Freddy was touching her hand, and he would not have it!

He went out into the hall and took up his cloak, throwing it around his shoulders as he stomped out of the house, wondering where the twins had gotten off to.

* * *

“Right then, Freddy.” Cherry patted his hand as she withdrew hers from his as gently as she could. The wild roses were in full bloom at her back and giving off a delicious scent. “Tell me. You have been somber all afternoon. What has happened—has someone annoyed you?”

“Why do you say that?” he asked sharply.

“Because I noticed your change of mood as soon as you returned from your friends yesterday, and then on the ride home.” She peeped a look at him in her style and saw him soften at once. “So then, confess it all, for I shan’t stop till I know.”

He gave her a wry smile and said gravely, “And that is what would be—a confession.” Then, bracing himself, he said, “Gentlemen don’t burden ladies with their problems.”

“Well, there is no doubt in my mind that you stand very much a gentleman, sir ... but I—” Her hand went to her chest as she inclined her head. “—am more than a lady.”

He colored up and stammered, “What ... what can you mean?”

“I mean that I am your senior by several years. I am your brother and sister’s governess and therefore hold some position of experience that you might find ... er ... helpful.”

He reached out and grabbed hold of her hand. “Thank you, Miss Sarah, but ... this is something I must work out for myself.”

She didn’t wish to press him just at that moment. Gently she once more withdrew the hand he was squeezing and said, “Well then, onward. It is nearly the moment of high tea, young man, and I for one stand in need of it.”

He laughed, stood up, and waited for her to rise and move forward. However, he stopped short when he came upon his older brother, who had been standing stock still on the garden path, partially hidden by the curve in the walkway between the large evergreens.

“Sky!” he said in some surprise. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Obviously,” said his lordship dryly.

“We were just going in for tea ...” Freddy said on a somewhat nervous note. He had his own reasons to be anxious about his brother’s hovering presence.

His lordship witnessed his brother’s anxious expression, and a frown descended as he seemed to vanish into thought. “Good ... go along then. I will bring Miss Sarah in with me, as I wish to have a few words with her regarding

the twins.” Clearly he had dismissed Freddy, and the young man could do naught but retreat, which he did with more haste than the occasion called for.

“Ah, am I to be pinked for dallying with young Frederick in the garden?” Cherry teased at her naughtiest, stealing his lordship’s thunder.

“Then you are aware of the impropriety of your conduct,” his lordship said. It was obvious that it had not been a question and that he expected no reply. He looked as though he had a ready lecture to read, but Cherry was up to his game and not playing.

A gurgle of laughter escaped her lips before she waved the whole thing off and exclaimed, “Nonsense! Impropriety, indeed.” With her chin, she indicated the house. “Look there, we sat in full view of the garden windows ... unlike when you lured me behind the tent at the fair ...” She hurried on as she witnessed a storm gathering in his dark blue eyes. “We simply had a conversation, older woman with a troubled young man. Tell me, where is the impropriety?”

He shook his head, and his brows were drawn. It was obvious he was suffering mixed emotions. “You have a habit of turning things about, but it won’t do, Miss Sarah. Can’t you see the lad is in love with you?”

“Absurd, my lord,” she answered softly. “Freddy is infatuated with me for the moment. All he needs is direction.”

“Which he should be getting from me,” his lordship returned testily.

“True, but it seems his scrapes have brought him under your censure. It is difficult to confide in someone you love and admire, and whose respect you honestly wish to obtain, when you are forever in the suds.” She reached over and touched his lordship’s arm. A spark shot through her fingers, but she managed to say, “How can he confess to you when he finds himself in yet another scrape?”

“Another scrape? Has he fallen into yet another scrape?” His lordship sounded disgusted.

“Stop that,” she returned. “That awful tone of yours ... so arrogant and superior. ’Tis why he can’t go to you with his problems. He fears censure.”

He stood erect, obviously momentarily taken aback by both her audacity and her words. His dark blue eyes narrowed, and he said, “Who are you really, Miss Sarah Parker? For I tell you now, you are not who you say.”

She waved that off. “We are speaking of Freddy.”

They were almost at the house. The front doors stood only a few feet from them, and she knew an urge to run. If she didn’t run, she was going to be breaking one more rule, because she was falling in love for this big, strong, rogue of a man, and then ... and then she would be in trouble.

“Yes, and one has to wonder how we ever managed to get on without you,” he said dryly as he reached for and opened the door.

“Hmmm,” Cherry brightly agreed. “One wonders, indeed my lord.” As she giggled and brushed by him, she felt a delicious tingle as their bodies touched in the frame of the open doorway.

She knew he would come to her that night. She had seen something in his eyes during dinner and then afterwards just before she took the twins to bed. After Freddy left for a night on the town, she found herself anticipating his every move.

His lordship arrived at the twins' chambers to help tuck them in. When he turned to her and invited her to join him by the fire in the library for a glass of sherry, she felt her heart quicken. She knew the safe thing to do was to decline, but Cherry rarely took the safe road ...

He looked sensual as he loosened his intricate neckcloth, removed his cutaway superfine and then his waistcoat, and dropped them negligently on the floor. He stood in his white shirtsleeves. It was open at the neckline in a long V, and the material clung to his broad, firm chest. As Cheryl eyed him she felt the need for air. She licked her lips as she watched him pour her a glass of the sweet brew. She noted that his eyes were on her lips, and she shivered as she took a sip.

"Are you cold, Miss Sarah?"

"No, the fire is lovely," she said, moving closer to it.

He was behind her, and his finger ran over her bare arm as he whispered, "You need to go to town and find some appropriate gowns ... something ... less ..." His voice was a caress. "...*revealing*."

"Yes, so I shall ... also, if I may purchase a simple riding habit. You can deduct it from my remuneration."

"Nonsense—you may purchase anything you need. Deduct it from your remuneration, indeed," he objected out loud. His voice was a low, charged sound of primal need, "Don't you see how much I want you, beauty? When you are mine ... I will take care of you—"

"Stop!" Cherry was horrified. He was *propositioning* her! "If I wanted you as well, I would not ask you to set me up as your mistress."

"But *you do* want me—I see it, feel it. You can't hide it from me, as I can't hide it from you. When we kiss ... when we look at one another—"

"You are very sure of yourself," she cut in hurriedly, threw down the sherry, and stepped away. "Good night, my lord." Her entire body had been on fire because she did want him. She wanted all of him, and it was more than her body wanting his. It was her heart that called his name, whispered longings in her brain. It was her heart that wanted him to take her into his arms and make wild, passionate love to her—*damn the consequences*.

Sky had her then in his all-consuming embrace, and it appeared he was determined to exhibit just how much they wanted each other as his lips parted hers. His magical tongue moved inside her sweet mouth and promised pleasures to the delicious mate it discovered there. His tongue lingered with hers gently, tutoring her on what was to come as it tangoed with her tongue and made her knees melt.

His hand moved down her back and pulled her in by her rump hard against him, and she felt his manhood throb against her belly while her loins beat out a rhythm that would not be denied.

He was so right—she wanted him, all of him—and still she managed the strength to break away from his burning kiss and to say in a hushed, barely audible sound, “Good night, my lord.”

It had taken everything she had not to run, because she was sure if she didn’t run she would turn, dive into his embrace, and beg him to rip off her clothes and take her right there, right then. She surprised herself and maintained her composure as she left the room and the man of her dreams at her back.

However, she had not locked her bedroom door, and she did not lie to herself. She wanted him to come for her ...

And he did.

It was dark in her bedroom with only a dim light from the crescent moon glowing at her small window. He didn’t speak as he stepped towards her bed and bent to hold her face and place a gentle kiss on her lips. Then all at once he was scooping her up cradle-like into his arms.

“What?” she whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to my bed, where you belong.”

* * *

Was it possible—her mind wondered as he pulled off her nightdress and his fingers burned her while they made a path over her body—was it possible for a woman to lose herself in a man?

She had never wanted to lose herself to a man, not so completely that she wouldn’t know where she began and ended. Yet here she was, not giving a fig for anything but his touch, his kiss ... and that huge thing pressed up against her side as his hands made their hungry path over her breasts. He bent his head and began to suckle at her nipples hard with arousal, and she groaned with pleasure. He said her name ... Sarah. Her mind bucked, and she wanted to tell him, *No! Not Sarah*, but then his lips were on hers and thought was gone.

He took her into a cloud of fantasy where his touch ruled and elicited the erotic sensations that stripped her of everything she had once been. Gone was the girl as the woman entered and took control.

“Beauty ... ah ... beauty,” he whispered at her ear as he kissed her throat and made a line down her body, spread her thighs and raised her rump with his hands, and then ...

His tongue lapped at her hot wetness and nibbled there until she was pushing into him and moving in a way she had never known possible. Talk with friends was one thing; this ... this was ...

He was driving her mad with desire as he pushed in his finger and worked her until she wanted to scream, *More ... please, more ...* and then finally she

uttered his name. Even to herself she sounded desperate. "Sky ... oh ..."

"Yes, love ... tell me what you want, what you need—do you need more ...?" His voice was a soft, joyous sound as he held his huge rod, and she watched him stroke it and then lay it first on her belly.

He moved it up towards her breasts, dripping a path on its journey. He held her breasts together as he bent his head to take her mouth with his, softly whispering as he nibbled at her lips, "Do you want me—all of me?" He placed his dick at her mouth, and she had no idea what exactly she was supposed to do.

But then he told her, "Lick it, sweetheart," and as she did, he moaned and encouraged her, saying, "Yes ... like that ... yes ..."

Instinct, desire, hunger made her lick it with a passion she had never known she could feel, and then he gently worked it into her mouth and said, "Suck it, sweet girl ... yes ... oh love ... yes ..."

Even as she did what he asked and lost herself to the act, he took it from her mouth and rubbed it on her breasts. "I want you ... as I have never wanted any other woman ... you are driving me wild," he whispered hungrily. Then he pulled her over him so that she lay on top, and he rubbed her nipples with his gentle, magical fingers until she thought she would die if he didn't do more ... and more ...

And then wildly he had her on her back once again, as he positioned himself, groaning with uncontrolled pleasure as he rammed into her hard and then suddenly stopped in mid-movement.

"Damnation to hell!" he murmured incredulously.

She was stunned into immobility. Why had he stopped? It had hurt ... yes, all the pleasure had suspended itself in that awful moment, but ... the hurt was gone ...

"Why didn't you tell me? My sweet little one—I ... I would not have hurt you for all the world!"

"Did you not think I had never done this before?" She smiled and touched his cheek. "Hmmm, then I must be a natural ..."

He chuckled and touched her lips. His cock was still throbbing inside her, and she wiggled as she told him, "Don't stop now, Sky. The deed is done—might as well complete the mission."

"But you have never ... and I feel the cad ..."

"As well you should ... now take me, my lord." She put her finger to his lips to hush any further discussion and pushed against him. "Sky," she said softly, and he groaned as he pushed further inside her.

She had no idea what she was supposed to do as she moved beneath him to his exquisite dance. She only knew what she wanted to do and ran with it. She met his thrusts with thrusts of her own and discovered herself a wanton woman full of heat and desire.

He held her tightly and kissed her with everything he had as he moved inside her, and she heard him moan with delight when she arched her back

and gave over to a complete climax that left her shuddering with pleasure.

“Yes, little one ... now move for me ... yes, like that ... oh squeeze my cock with that beautiful honey box ... ah ... yes, you got it ... oh beauty, you beauty you ...” His voice was hoarse with ecstasy as he allowed himself to go off. Then he held her tightly, rolled over with her in his arms, and with his cock still hard and ready for more inside her said, “Ride me, sweetings ... ride me now.”

She wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but she had a very good idea as she positioned herself and threw her head back with the new raw sensation that swept through her. She touched his hard belly with her fingers as she ground herself on him and rotated her hips. Then she bent to give him her tongue, and he sucked it in and met it with his own.

Then all at once he pulled out of her, picked her up around the middle and set her in place on her hands and knees. He was behind her and maneuvering his cock all over her rump. “Your ass is exquisite, love ... you are perfect ...” And then he was shoving himself inside her once more. “I can't get enough of you ... the more I take, the more I want, Sarah.”

She said nothing to this, but suddenly she realized he didn't even know her real name. She wanted him to call her by her real name, and when he softly repeated, “Sarah,” she answered, “No ... call me Cherry ... please.”

“I will call you the stars ... the moon ... the sun, for that is what you are fast becoming for me ... Cherry love, Cherry ripe ... oh my very own Cherry ...”

And then he made a feral sound in his throat that excited her beyond reason. She shoved back against him, and he worked her until she was arching her back once more and calling out his name as though a woman possessed.

He kissed her eyes, her nose, and her ears and whispered, “Now let's see if I can do that for you again ...”

~ *Thirteen* ~

SPRING WAS NOW making a push to display itself in full array. Wildflowers lined the side of the road and permeated the air with their arresting scents. A breeze, slight but cool as it came in soft waves, played with Cherry's black, silky curls and rippled at her straw bonnet. She adjusted the ribbon at her neck with one gloved hand while she managed the matched chestnut pair before her with the other hand.

"Sweet goers," she commented quietly, more to herself than to the twins. She had so much on her mind. She had a world of hurt awaiting her if she didn't take hold of her problem and lay it out for Sky. She had to tell him the truth before he found out on his own.

Felix sat forward in the gig and bent over his sister, who sat between him and Cherry. "Do you think so? I wanted Thomas to hitch up the bays. Now, *they* can move."

"I have no doubt of that, Felix, for I have seen them." Cherry smiled fondly at him. "However, it would not be seemly for the Bromley governess to be driving them into town." Too often the twins treated her as though she were family. That was something she had to deal with carefully. For now, and until she could come clean with who she really was, she had to remind them of her position.

Felix pooh-poohed such talk in unintelligible sounds, ending it with, "Stuff, I say. You could handle them. You aren't a bit ham-handed—" He looked towards Freddy, who had been riding his horse near enough to the gig to hear him. "Like m'brute of a brother, Freddy, here." Felix bestowed a wide and impish grin on Cherry, and she laughed out loud.

"Brat!" Freddy flung at him, reaching down to pop him a swat with the end of his crop over his uncovered head of fair hair.

Francine had been looking on with a sweet expression upon her pretty little face. Suddenly she hugged Cherry around the waist and said, "See ... I knew you would make all things right here at Bromley. I shall never let you go, Miss Sarah. I want you with us always."

"Ah, my dear Francie ... how sweet. Well, if I am to stay on, then 'tis time you all called me by the name my friends call me, Miss Cherry for Cheryl ... right?"

They all oohed and aahed, and Cherry sighed to herself. Right, one item taken care of that would bring her one step closer to confessing the truth.

“Say you shall not leave us, Miss ... Miss Cherry.” Francine wiggled her nose as she got used to the new name.

“Well, the future is difficult to predict, but I certainly don’t want to go.”

“Yes, but ...” Francine pursued. “You must not leave us ... I think even Sky would find that horrid.”

Cherry touched her chin. “My sweet Francine. I shall stand your friend wherever I might be, and hopefully I shall not be far when you need me.”

“I don’t like that answer,” Francine returned on a frown. “It has the sound of good-bye, in it.”

“Not at all.” Cherry smiled and returned her attention to the road as the village was soon approaching.

“Girls!” Felix stuck in, apparently bored with the conversation. “Forever going on and on about something mushy. What I want to know is, can we go to that bang-up cake shop for tarts and hot chocolate?”

Cherry eyed him warningly. “*Not* if you mean to stuff your little face with half a dozen of those things and ruin your dinner.” She was one to talk, she thought with some amusement, as wasn’t that just what she used to do until very recently? And then once again, unbidden, Sky’s face filtered into her mind’s eye. The memory of his touch two nights past and all that she felt came surging back. She had to force it away. Two days—he had been gone two days, and without so much as a *by your leave*! She felt hurt to the quick, but then ... he had spoken not one word of love. He had wanted to set her up as a mistress ... not a bride. She sighed to herself. She had some work ahead, for if she was going to win his heart, she was going to have to confess the truth of her situation, and that might just lose him to her forever.

“I promise ... not more than five.” Felix twinkled back at her.

“Your brother is every bit the brat you called him, Freddy!” Cherry laughed.

“He is indeed, Miss Sar ... I mean Miss Cherry.” Freddy smiled at her.

She could see his heart wasn’t in the smile. Something was terribly wrong; she was going to have to get to the bottom of it, and soon.

* * *

His lordship tooled his spirited dapple with sure skill, but his mind was not on schooling his horse as he made his way down the Post Road back to Bromley. He had been in London for two days. Two days—only two days, and it had been torture. It seemed a century since he had last looked at her precious face ...

This was absurd. He was behaving like a schoolboy. What was wrong with him? He had enjoyed many beautiful and spirited women in his twenty-eight years, but this one ... this one was unlike any he had ever known. She had found a way into his mind and managed to take control.

He had gone to look in on his intended bride with great misgiving. Had he done the right thing? Was he doing the right thing? He had stopped by the

Elton residence only to be told that Miss Elton was still ill above stairs, and never had he felt such relief. He had done the expected and sent a note with flowers ...

How was he going to go through with this engagement? Perhaps the marriage was no longer necessary? Could he cry off without becoming the worst cad in creation? Miss Elton might not even be the right choice if she were sickly. How then could she look after his twins ... give him children? Give him children? He didn't want children with her or any other woman, he suddenly realized.

What was wrong with him? His entire world had been turned inside out, and he was fast losing control. Cherry ... she said her name was Cherry, but he could find no one who knew anything about a family with a daughter by the name of Cherry Parker. Who the devil was she? She had never been bred to be a governess. She was too self-assured. Her gowns, though showing signs of wear, were of the first stare, both fashionable and expensive. It was that which had made him think perhaps she had been kept in style by another man. It was that which made him think she ran from a man, not her stepfather. Well, that had turned out to be rubbish. She had been a virgin ... and what was more, he would never let anyone else near her. Whether she wanted it or not, he would protect her ...

What was happening to him? He had lost all control. This Cherry Parker as she called herself had taken him over ...

Bromley loomed closer in the distance, and he actually felt his heartbeat increase rapidly. Excitement tickled his senses. He missed her ... and the twins. He had actually gotten to know them on this last visit.

He felt a thrill as his horse trotted into Bromley Park and approached the house. Cherry ... he would soon be with his Cherry.

* * *

Cherry looked up at the sky. Hmm, clouds were accumulating, and she rather thought they should start for home. She had purchased the day gowns Sky had so insisted she obtain for her position. She wasn't, however, able to buy the drab, uniform-like gray gowns suitable for her position.

She had an eye for fashion and just could not wear anything so frumpy. However, she compromised and found a lovely black gown with a white lace collar and tightly fitted sleeves with lace cuffs. She had the seamstress do a quick nip at the waist, which was only slightly too big for her. The next gown she purchased was navy silk with a creamy chiffon round collar, puff matching navy sleeves of the same chiffon, and an Empire waist.

There, she thought, *that would do*. And then she spied a black wool riding habit, with a white chiffon blouse and a matching black top hat, trimmed in the same white chiffon that flounced at the back of the hat. It was dear, but she smiled to herself and paid for it with the money she still had from when she had run away on that fateful evening ... which seemed so long ago.

She stepped out of the shop and noted with a frown that the two young men who had been extremely bold to her when she had walked the short distance to the dress shop earlier were still nearby. They had walked right up to her as she had entered the shop; although they'd tipped their hats to her, they'd blocked her path as they introduced themselves as brothers Walter and Thomas Anderson. She did not reciprocate but had politely requested they step aside. They had, but it was obvious they were angry. Remembering the encounter made trepidation tingle inside her tummy.

Cherry was not concerned with her looks, but the fact was she was certainly a beauty and had attracted attention in the small town, as well as stirred curiosity.

She turned heads as she made her way down the avenue. Two of those heads belonged to the Anderson brothers, and they followed.

She saw Freddy across the street and stopped to wave, but she halted her hand in mid-air because he seemed intent as he headed for a very odd-looking gentleman standing outside a weathered storefront.

Cherry's brows drew together as she saw that the storefront was in fact a drinking establishment. The odd and older gentleman wore a dilapidated gray top hat and shabby clothes. His face was grizzled, and something about the way he moved repulsed Cherry immediately. Her eyes opened wide and flew to Freddy's face. What in heaven's name had Freddy to do with such a character?

She went hurriedly to cut him off, calling out brightly, "Right then, Freddy ... we need to get going, as it does look like rain."

"Miss Cherry ... there is one more thing I have to take care of while I am in town. Do you think ... would you mind terribly starting for home without me, and I shall catch up as quickly as I can?"

She knew he expected her to reply in the positive, and while she didn't really mind the notion of driving unescorted (in fact she had always enjoyed the freedom before), she did mind going off and leaving him with such a rough-looking individual. "Yes, but, Freddy, it is already near dark ... and I don't relish the notion of taking the Post Road with the children in an open carriage alone at this hour." Zounds, just listen to her rubbish, but she had to make a push to get Freddy away from that awful man.

"Forgive me, Miss Cherry ... I promise, I will catch up, for I swear it won't take me long to be done with this business."

Cherry had no choice but to watch Freddy fall into step with this man as they went into the drinking establishment. *What, Freddy, just what deep game are you playing*, she wondered sadly.

There was nothing for it. She went to the cake shop where Felix and Francine were enjoying their tarts and hot chocolate. They made their way to the livery, where she tipped the groom who had cared for the horses, and off they went onto the Post Road towards Bromley.

They hadn't been on the Post Road for more than five minutes when

Cherry felt edgy and looked around. It was just those Anderson boys that had made her nervous earlier.

* * *

Sky paced to and fro in his central hall as he waited for his family and their governess to return from town. He stood at the open front door, then closed it and went to peer out the large hallway window.

It was with great disappointment that he had received the news they were not home, and the anticipation of seeing them again had him in a fidget very much unlike himself.

It was nearing five o'clock, and still no sign of them. Soon it would be very dark. He'd heard stories about the highwaymen on the section of the Post Road that led to Bromley. Well, Freddy was escorting them, after all. Ah yes, Freddy. He shook his head, but then thought, *Freddy is just a boy and unarmed.*

Highwaymen were most definitely armed.

This took hold of him and gathered weight. Suddenly, he could stand it no more. He would go and meet them and bring them home safely. His own horse was too fatigued from the journey out of London, but he could use the dark bay Cherry had been working lately.

He hurried back to the stables, helped his groom tack up the bay, and hurried off for the main road. *Damn, but I've a bad feeling ...*

* * *

Dusk had quickly descended, and Cherry's uneasiness grew. She could hear the *brump brump* of horses' hooves at their backs, and her own horses were acting fidgety. However, she attempted to remain calm, pleased at least that the children were happily absorbed in chatting about their afternoon. They addressed her from time to time, but she only answered absently as she began to pick up the pace of the horses. It was a rutted road, and she once again had to slow down as the twins objected to the bumps.

"Someone's coming up behind us!" Felix announced suddenly. He was halfway turned in his seat and staring into the growing darkness.

"How do you know?" his sister asked with interest. "I can't see anyone."

"I can hear a horse ... no ... I think two." Felix frowned. "And only look at the dust behind us, Miss Cherry ... they're riding hard."

She heard the anxious sound in his voice. Felix was young but very much up on things. "I'm sure just someone trying to get home," she said, trying to soothe him,

"Easy, lads," Cherry cooed to her horses, who were nervously reacting to the fact that unknown horses were quickly coming up at their backs.

The Andersons slowed their steeds as they came up on them and then boldly moved to Bromley horses' heads, commanding, "Ho there, loves ...

ho ...”

Cherry pulled up her team, for these riders had also moved into their path. She put up her chin and demanded, “Just what do you think you are doing?”

One lad looked worriedly at the other. “You’re scaring them, Thomas.”

“She deserves a lesson, she does. She snubbed us in town ... we can’t allow that, Walter, and we won’t allow that.”

“Aw ... she didn’t know who we were.”

“Then she needs a lesson.”

The lanky Walter turned an apologetic face to them and said, “M’brother and I were wishful ... we ... thought we might escort you—”

His brother Thomas cut in. “Dangerous route, the Post Road. People get waylaid all the time.”

“Thank you, but we haven’t that far to go,” Cherry answered stiffly.

“Well, mean to escort you all the same.”

“I don’t think that is necessary—” Cherry said.

“Go away,” Francine said, folding her arms across her chest.

Felix stood up in the gig as though to protect his sister and Miss Cherry and said, “You heard my sister ... go away.”

“Well now, little rascal—my brother is going to drive you and your sister home while I give Missy a ride on my fine blood.” He had already dismounted and grabbed for Cherry’s reins, pulling them roughly out of her hold.

Felix kicked at him, and Thomas Anderson pushed the boy back hard enough that he fell backwards into the gig. Francine screamed and went to her brother.

Cherry hit Thomas with her driving whip as he pulled her roughly out of the gig. She fell to the grassy earth and heard Walter Anderson shout, “Stop it, Tom! What the deuce are you doing?”

“Whot? Am I to let a snippet like that address me in such a manner? We own the mill, and I’m sick of the gentry treating us—”

“*Like the blackguards you are?*” Cherry shouted as she jumped up and brushed the dirt away from her clothes. She stomped forward and shoved the lad with all her might. He went reeling backwards and was momentarily startled, but not enough, for he immediately raised his hand and slapped Cherry across her cheek.

Felix jumped out of the gig, ran to her, and began kicking at the man’s shins. Francine joined him. During the scuffle none noticed another rider bearing down on them.

Something though caught Walter’s attention, and he looked around. He gulped as he called for his brother’s attention. “Tom ... eh Tom, we have trouble ...”

They all looked up to find a large, darkly clad man, his hair blowing wildly about his face, his cloak flowing in the breeze, on a bay horse moving at some speed directly for them and looking like the devil about to attack.

Tom looked around irritably, for Cherry had once again taken up her

driving whip and was threatening him with it. He frowned at his brother as he demanded, "What the devil—who is that?"

His younger brother had no time to reply, for Lord Westbrooke was already upon them and looking like a thunder god!

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" his lordship demanded of Tom Anderson, who stood still and staring defiantly.

"What? We were just offering to drive the lady and her brats home. That's all," Tom answered audaciously. "And it's none of your business, now is it?"

"Allow me to advise you that even if the lady you refer to were not under the protection of my family because of the status she holds in our household, even if the brats were not my own brother and sister, still would I take exception to you forcing yourself upon them." So saying, Lord Sky Westbrooke jumped off his horse and landed the youth a facer that sent him plummeting to the earth Cherry had just picked herself up from.

Felix roared with pleasure, and Francine folded her little arms across her chest and said, "*There*, you horrible man."

"Zounds, brother ... 'tis himself ... 'tis Lord Westbrooke," Walter breathed as he gave Sky a slight bow and offered, "We are certainly sorry, my lord, indeed, we had no idea ... meant no real harm ... just a bit of un—"

"Is that so?" His lordship directed his question back to Tom, who had just picked himself up off the ground.

Tom Anderson was upright once more and had not made any moves to continue the fight. He stood, however, defiant but not stupid enough to carry this any further. He lowered his gaze and mumbled, "No harm intended ..."

Rubbing his cheek, he made his way to his horse grazing nearby and hoisted himself into the saddle. Silently both decided it was best to depart, and without another word they rode off at a hasty trot back towards town.

His lordship grasped Cherry's shoulders as he looked down at her face and inquired, "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

"He pulled her out of the gig and onto the ground!" Francine wailed, hugging Miss Cherry around her waist. She had never witnessed anything like this before.

Felix came to stand by Cherry's side and looked up at her. "Pluck to the backbone!" he said adoringly up at her. "She was about to bash him over the head when you arrived, Sky ... a regular right 'un, she is." Pride made him swell and beam, well pleased with the entire adventure.

His lordship looked around, saying, "Indeed ... but we will talk about the wisdom of traveling the Post Road once it is dark. Where is Freddy? I was told he had accompanied you."

"Yes, yes, Freddy gave us escort and meant to catch up to us ... I—I suppose he was delayed." Cherry bit her bottom lip and looked away from his lordship's penetrating gaze. She kept her peace, for she knew Freddy was in for it now.

"Delayed? Really? He allowed you to set off by yourselves on the Post

Road at this hour ... alone?" Clearly his lordship was stunned. "I cannot believe he is so lost to what is decent ..." He allowed this to trail off, and Cherry watched him fall deep into thought.

"Well, it wasn't quite dark when we set off, and I am certain he thought he would catch up to us immediately ..." Cherry said meekly.

"Indeed," his lordship said angrily as he led Cherry back to the gig and helped her get situated. "Right then, monkeys ... in you go—I am certain the entire household is anxiously awaiting our return."

As 'household' could only mean staff, and since his lordship had never indicated any concern for the staff's interests in their regards, Cherry found this a remarkable statement. However, she made no demur as she urged the fidgety pair of horses forward.

Little was said on the drive homeward, for even the twins were strangely reticent. Cherry heard Felix whisper to his sister, "Maybe something has happened to Freddy ... he would have caught up to us otherwise."

"I love Freddy, Felix, I love him so much, but this was bad, very bad. If he cared about us he wouldn't have just left us ... would he? I tell you what, he is in for it now and deserves to be."

"Ay ... maybe ... I dunno ... and don't want to talk about it any more."

Cherry pretended not to hear any of this, but she was herself quite concerned. Had something happened to Freddy? He was infatuated with her enough that she knew he meant to catch up to them and give them escort home.

She sighed and worried over this. Just what was wrong with Freddy?

~ *Fourteen* ~

DINNER HAD BEEN consumed in a strained atmosphere. Freddy was not yet home, which seemed to be an ominous cloud that hung over them all.

For Cherry other matters also kept a shroud over her mood. Until he'd appeared on Post Road, she had not seen his lordship since she slipped out of his bed, donned her nightdress, and hurried down the long corridor to her own small room. He had been gone in the morning, and since then she'd had mixed emotions floating about her head.

His lovemaking had taken her mind, her heart, and she felt even her soul to another level of awareness. However, she saw the world with open eyes and knew society would condemn her for her wanton behavior. She told herself she didn't care and that what 'society didn't know—they didn't need to know,' which of course made her smile. However, what did really concern her was what did *he* think of her? She glanced sideways at him hurriedly lest he catch her looking and noticed the thoughtful expression in his dark blues before she turned away.

Sky took up his snifter of brandy from the sideboard and looked directly at Cherry as she played a card game with the children. Francine lost her hand and sighed. "I'm tired ... think I'll go up to bed."

Felix surprised Cherry and his lordship by agreeing to this, and then Cherry caught a sly smile as she watched the two kiss Sky's cheek and turn to run and hug her tightly. She said lightly to them, "I'll come and tuck you in."

"No," returned Francine. "You stay, Miss Cherry ... 'tis a nice fire. Felix and I—well, we'll just go wash up and play another game in our rooms."

Again, the funny little smile appeared on Francine's face before they left the library. Cherry turned to his lordship, all too aware that Francine had closed the library door, and said softly, "I think I'll turn in as well."

He reached for and caught her fingers. "No." He pulled her towards him. "Wait awhile yet." He moved to the sideboard and poured her a cup of coffee with a dab of cream and handed it to her. "I have noticed that you like a cup after dinner."

She felt a warm glow as she took the cup from him and he bade her be seated. She couldn't believe how shy she felt and took a ladies' chair across from him, rather than sit on the sofa beside him. Only a few nights before she had been wildly, erotically, passionately in his arms. Now, she couldn't meet his eyes. She turned towards the fire and sipped her coffee. She could feel him

watching her. Something began vibrating in her chest. It was vibrating so strongly she thought he might hear it ... *was that her heart?*

"I ... we ... I thought we might talk."

"Talk?" *Oh no, was he going to send her away?*

"About Freddy," he said after a moment, looking at her intently. "Has Freddy told you something I should ... at this point know?"

She shook her head. "He has not confided in me. He said it was his job to protect me, not embroil me in anything that might be troubling him."

"Did he? Well, that is something, at least." He bent over and touched her knee, and Cherry felt a shiver shake her. When she met his dark blue eyes, he sucked in a breath of air as he said softly, "Cherry ... sweet ... we are in a difficult situation."

Ah, she thought at once, here it comes. "Yes ... perhaps we are. The rogue in me, and, my lord, I am ... you must realize by now, a rogue, does not give a fig about proprieties. However, the governess ... does, very much."

He frowned at her. "Miss Cherry ... or Sarah Parker ... I think the time has come for you to tell me who you really are—where you really come from."

"I have given you my name."

"Stop it. Don't prevaricate to me, woman. Look at you—at the clothes you arrived in, which I'd wager came from the best shops on Bond Street. Look at the way you carry yourself, the way you ride."

"Indeed, your point?"

"My point being that you were not groomed to be a governess!" he snapped.

"True. I was certainly taken very good care of ... until I chose to leave."

"Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Why did you choose to leave, and whom did you choose to leave?"

"I found it impossible to stay. Remember? It was I ... running away. You must recall?" she teased, attempting to lighten the moment.

"This is absurd. Look at you now—your gown, while modest, displays style. Even when you shopped for a governess's gown you still were able to clothe yourself in the first stare. Do not try and fob me off by telling me you have chosen to be a governess!"

"I am telling you that I choose to be a governess to your darling Felix and Francine," she answered, her brow up with the challenge. She put away her coffee cup and stood up. "They are most important, and I think it best that we maintain a distance from one another. The other night ... was the other night, and now I mean to—"

He was on her in a trice, pulling her into his embrace. His voice was husky, tender, and full with emotion as he whispered her name. "Cherry ... at least that was the truth. That is your name ... I can feel it."

His lips found hers immediately, gently at first with a cherishing aura that enveloped them both. This moved quickly into something wild, something

that nearly engulfed her, and she was amazed at her own strength as she pulled away from him. "Please, my lord, do not—"

"Do you think I would not take care of you always?" He frowned as his eyes hungrily looked into hers.

"It was a moment of madness, that night, but it ends there. I shall not take on two responsibilities—governess by day, mistress by night." She turned and gave him her back as she walked stiffly from the room.

It had taken everything she had to walk away from him. So much depended on it. She wanted him, but she wanted him for all time ...

* * *

They sat in a somber mood at the breakfast table. The day was a bright one, and spring was displaying itself in seductive waves, but even this did not heighten the spirits of the assembled family at Bromley. This was due nearly all to the fact that Freddy had not returned home until ten minutes before breakfast had been served!

In addition to that, his lordship appeared to be ill-tempered on every front. Cherry wondered (somewhat hoped) that it had been because her door had been locked last evening.

Freddy attempted a cavalier air as he sauntered past his older brother and made for his bedroom, while the twins and Cherry looked on just as they entered the breakfast room.

"Frederick!" His lordship's tone boded ill.

"Good morning ... see you later, Sky. Mean to get some sleep and be down for lunch." Freddy's attitude didn't extend into his eyes, and Cherry noted his trepidation with pity.

His lordship controlled his temper and said in a hard voice, "Really, is that what you mean to do? Well, I don't mean to cast a rub in your plans, but I fear I must. Come with me to the library."

Freddy hung his head and did not look towards either of the twins or Miss Cherry as he followed his lordship into the library.

"Come on then," Cherry said, trying to bolster the twins. "Let's go in and nibble at something until they are done and can join us."

"He is in for it, isn't he?" Felix asked sadly.

"Yes, and though we three know he quite deserves a dressing down, I am certain you feel as badly about it as I do," Cherry said and touched Felix's shoulder.

"Aye ... but Freddy should have been with us," Felix returned. "I think it is time for him to start behaving."

Cherry laughed and hugged him. "Come on ... for Francine is about to steal all the custard tarts!"

* * *

The twins and Cherry sat patiently for as long as they could, with Cherry sipping at her coffee and the twins fidgeting, as she had allowed them only one tart each.

“Perhaps this is not the time to ask his lordship if I can take you to visit the Wilsons,” Cherry said on a heavy sigh.

“Aw,” Felix started.

“Hmmm,” Francine murmured in agreement, “he would only say no. Didn’t you see his face, Felix? He is so angry.”

“Awww,” was all the comment Felix meant to make on the subject.

“We could spend the morning doing your lessons and visit the Wilsons perhaps in the afternoon?” Cherry suggested.

His lordship arrived with Freddy in tow, and breakfast was served. Somber, in fact, was an understatement.

Cherry tried a few times to enliven the atmosphere but quickly caved when she received nothing but grunts. She played with her eggs but ate very little. She had her own problems looming as well as theirs.

“Is there something amiss with your meal, Miss Cherry?” His lordship’s brow was up, but he looked deep into her eyes with his own, and the soft caress he gave her with those dark blues made her heart actually skip.

“The coffee is lovely and eggs, wonderful, thank you.”

“Humph,” his lordship returned. “You don’t eat enough, and I have noticed that you have taken off too much weight since you first arrived at Bromley, and you were thin then.”

“I eat quite enough, thank you,” Cherry replied, puzzled at his concern.

He grimaced but allowed the subject to drop. Since the twins had finished their meals and were fidgeting to be off, she lowered her lashes and asked his lordship softly, “May I take the twins and retire to the schoolroom?”

He nodded, allowed Francine to bear-hug him and kiss him soundly on his cheek, and smiled warmly at Felix. Then he and Freddy stood up as Cherry stood to take her charges and escape.

Freddy did not, however, sit back down, and Cherry heard him say as she left the room, “Must I also request permission to be excused, my lord brother?”

Oh—this is so awful, she thought as she hurried after the twins.

* * *

“You are a man, are you not? You decide what you must and must not do, what is right, and what is not. Only be ready to pay the consequences for the wrong choices,” his lordship said quietly.

Freddy strode from the room, and though he dearly wanted to slam the door at his back, he restrained himself. At the top of the stairs, he saw Cherry.

She called out to the twins, “I will be with you in a moment. I want to speak to Freddy.”

“Good idea,” Francine said.

“I want to listen,” Felix returned quietly and out of Cherry’s earshot.

Francine hurriedly pulled him along.

Cherry hurried down the stairs to Freddy and said as she took up his hand, “Time for you and me—”

He shook his head. “I know you want to help ... but it is more than I can bear, and I am so very ashamed.”

She stopped and held both his arms. “Why, Freddy? What can you mean?”

“Sky told me that you were accosted on the road, and, Miss Cherry ... I feel a cad ...”

“Absurd boy!” she answered him at once and took his hand. “Come with me to the study. I am a very good listener as well as a good talker, and you need to have a little of both. Freddy, I have been in the suds more than I can count, so I understand ...”

He allowed her to pull him along and plopped himself down heavily on the sofa as she sat beside him. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. “I have made a mull of it, and what you must think me ...?”

“What I think is that you have been playing deep and need a hand to help you out of the mire. All of us do from time to time, you know.”

He looked at her sharply and breathed on a whisper, “You don’t know how deep. And there is no help for it now.”

“There is always help, though we don’t always recognize it. Come on, Freddy, what is it? Gotten yourself into debt?” It was a guess, but one based on many small things that Cherry had noticed in the last week.

“How could you know ...?” he was startled into replying.

“Never mind that. How much do you owe, Freddy?” she pursued on a gentle note.

“More than I was able to pay, and it was a *debt of honor*.” His voice dropped an octave. “I had no choice you see—I had to pay it.”

“A gambling debt? Of course, oh, Freddy—I see it all now,” she said sympathetically. “You are honor-bound to pay it and have not been able to?”

No point in dressing him down. What was done was done. Now they had to find a solution.

“No, I paid it. I went to ... a moneylender.” He closed his eyes.

“You what?” she was shocked into shrieking. “Never say so. You are underage—never say he loaned you money?”

“I don’t know about that. He didn’t seem to care about my age. Knew I was Lord Bromley and that one day ... well, never mind all that. I had to put up m’father’s ring. It is an old emerald worth a fortune ... more than he gave me. At any rate, I don’t wear it. But I liked it ... was m’father’s, and I am sick about it.”

“How much do you owe him?”

“You don’t want to know.” He looked away.

“Oh, but I do. How much, Freddy?”

“A thousand pounds.” Again, he looked away.

Cherry swallowed the words that sprang to her lips. She took a minute to compose herself and asked gently, “And of course you did not confide in your brother?”

“No—how can I? He already thinks me irresponsible ...” His voice trailed away.

“I shan’t go into that. There is no point dwelling on how it happened. It did. Now we must set it right. You must tell Skyler. Come clean, Freddy. He will be angry, of course, but he will think more of you for confessing the whole like a man.”

“No.”

“Freddy, trust me. Allow your brother to be a brother to you.”

The library door opened, and his lordship stood there, his face a mask. “Do I intrude?” he asked on a dry note.

Cherry could have boxed his ears. Inwardly she fumed and marveled at his ill timing. Instead of gritting her teeth, however, she smiled sweetly and said, “Why, how so? You could not intrude in your own home.”

“It isn’t *his* home,” Freddy stuck in pugnaciously. “It is actually my home. This is Bromley Grange, not Westbrooke Towers!”

Cherry rounded on him like a tigress. “What an unhandsome thing to say. His lordship is not only your guardian, but your brother as well.”

Freddy flushed and immediately retracted his statement. “I am very sorry, Sky ... honestly ... I don’t know what is wrong with me.”

Sky was frowning and answered quietly, “I know, Freddy. Don’t think of it.”

Cherry got to her feet. “Well, I have dallied with you long enough, Frederick. The twins are probably tearing the schoolroom apart by now.” She started for the door, but Sky reached for and touched her arm as she passed him, and she stopped.

“Miss Cherry.” His voice was a gentle wave. “Don’t go ... you needn’t go.”

She smiled at him. “Oh, I think I must.” On a softer note she added, “’Tis time for brothers to be just that.” She gave him a long look and then felt his eyes on her as she left. She rather thought he understood and was about to approach the situation with Freddy from another angle.

~ Fifteen ~

LADY ELTON PACED. She eyed the letter she clasped in her hands and then plopped herself down on her pink satin ladies' chair to read it again.

Dear Lady Elton:

In reply to your very welcome letter, I regret to advise you that Cherry is not with me.

It grieves me to read that you have been ill with worry.

At least I may rest your fears and assure you that Cherry is safe and, I believe, quite happy.

I cannot divulge her whereabouts, for I gave her my word that I would not. Forgive me.

I will, however, forward your letter to her so that she may see for herself what suffering you are experiencing. Perhaps then she may reconsider and return home.

Fondly,

Polly Corbett (now Mrs. Polly Adams)

Well, what was she to do now? Naught. Polly was her last hope. She had learned something though. At least Cherry had been in touch with dear Polly, who had always been a steadying influence on her. And at least Cherry was quietly installed somewhere. Yes, but where?

Her bedroom door opened, and her maid, Maria, bobbed a curtsy, saying, "His lordship of Dartford is here, m'lady, and he says to tell ye won't be put off today."

"James! Good gracious. What shall I tell him?" Lady Elton wailed.

"Mayhap the truth, m'lady. Miss Cherry and his lordship were ever good friends. He jest might be knowing where she could be."

"Hush, you dreadful child. You and Cherry were good friends, so then, you tell me where she is, for I swear she always confided in you."

"No, I don't know, and I've told ye and told ye that. If I knew, I would tell ye for her sake, I would."

"Yes, yes ... very well then, perhaps I should take someone into my confidence. Perhaps young Dartford might be able to help." She moved to her mirror, saying over her shoulder, "Show his lordship to the library and have coffee brought to us there, child."

“Yes, m’lady.”

Lady Elton patted her short gray curls, screwed up her mouth, shook her head, and bolstered herself. She was about to embarrass herself with the confession about Cherry’s situation, but she did trust young Dartford.

James Dartford was, like Cherry, one and twenty years old. He was tall, lean, athletically built, and quite boyishly attractive. His hair was layered in waves of gold to his neckline, and his eyes were an interesting shade of green. He was considered to be a marriage prize and was much sought after even though he was only just out of Eton. Lady Elton knew (although she had hoped for a match between them) that he and Cherry were friends and that he was still too interested in fox hunting, foxhounds, and field hunters to be looking to settle down.

His and Cherry’s relationship had begun when they were toddlers. Since that time their friendship had blossomed, and they were nearly like brother and sister. Even long separations while each was away at school had not altered their sense of loyalty and affection for one another, and Lady Elton was certain he would not by gossip betray her stepdaughter’s scandalous behavior to anyone.

She entered the library, hand outstretched. “My lord ... it has been weeks since we have seen you.”

He smiled broadly. “I have been in the country, but I have come here every morning this past week and have been turned away.” He put up a finger. “Now, see her I will, infection be damned!”

“Yes, but we have a problem ...” Lady Elton said as she sank onto her yellow damask ladies’ chair.

“Problem?”

Lady Elton waved him to sit opposite her. “A very horrible problem, and I am at a loss as to how to deal with it.”

He sat, leaned forward, and said with complete sincerity, “Only tell me how I may help you, and rest assured, it will be done.”

“Cherry! She is not ill ... but ... but gone ... she is gone ...”

“Gone you say? What do you mean, gone?”

“Word of honor ... this stays between us?”

“Of course—need you ask?”

“Cherry has run away,” Lady Elton said in a hushed voice.

“She what?” It was nearly a shout of laughter. “Upon my soul! The little devil. Whatever possessed her to do that?”

“I am afraid, it is all my fault. You see ... she got herself into a dreadful scrape—oh, James darling, you can’t imagine ...”

“Oh yes, I can. Besides, the Jersey told me all about it. Said if she didn’t curb herself and her wayward ways, she would be refused vouchers to Almack’s.”

“Well, the Jersey told me Princess Esterhazy had decided to refuse her vouchers.” She waved this off. “Never mind that now. As it happened, Lord

Westbrooke offered for her, you see ...”

“Lord Westbrooke?” James exclaimed in wonder. “Upon my soul!”

“Just so.” Her ladyship was pleased to find James’s ready understanding. “What was I to do? Let such a catch slip away? I agreed, of course.”

“Without Cherry’s consent?” James nearly whooped with amusement. “Never say so. She wouldn’t have him, my lady ... because I am fairly certain she wouldn’t have the foggiest notion who he even is.”

“As you say, she would not have him. Said a great deal about not marrying unless it was for love and thought me a ... a ... terrible person for trying to force her.” Lady Elton looked away. “She called me a ‘stepmother’.”

“Well, you are her stepmother,” James said reasonably.

“Yes, but she meant that I was no better than ... a terrible stepmother,” Lady Elton returned, still smarting from the accusation.

“No, well, she was out there. Nothing terrible about you, and I know for a fact she holds you in high esteem. Right then—she balked. Don’t signify. She doesn’t want him—doesn’t have to have him. Why run away?”

“I told her that she had no choice. I told her I would force her to marry him.”

“*You never did that!* You couldn’t have said that?” James was amazed. “Knowing Cherry ... you said that?”

“I did, I actually did. I was so frustrated with her wildness ... At any rate, she believed I meant it, though in truth, James, you know that I only meant it at that moment. She took off in the middle of the night—over a week ago—and I can’t find her.”

“She went to Polly. Loves Polly. She would go there.”

“Polly writes that Cherry isn’t with her.”

“Does she? Never mind that. Polly wouldn’t rat on Cherry. But that’s where she is. Has to be. I’ll go fetch her.”

“Will you?” Lady Elton breathed a sigh of relief.

“Aye, I’ll bring her home, see if I don’t.”

“Oh, James. You are a dear, for I don’t know what I was going to tell his lordship. He is bound to be calling again.”

“Did Cherry object to Westbrooke’s age? Mayhap she thought the fellow too old. I think he is eight and twenty, you know.”

“She didn’t care about knowing a thing about him. Said she wouldn’t marry without love.”

“Loon of a girl, but she has a point there, and she is the best there is, you know. If I were you, I’d tell Westbrooke that you shouldn’t have given your consent without taking your daughter’s wishes into account and be done with the lie about her being ill.”

“Oh ... how can I do that?”

“Easy—just tell him.”

“Couldn’t you instead try talking her into at least meeting him?”

“No,” James responded emphatically. “Don’t push her to do anything, for

stands to reason she'll do the opposite."

"Yes, but—"

"I'm off!" James was already up and striding towards the library door. He turned and added, "Don't fret, Lady Elton. Cherry is always giving me the most wonderful adventures."

However, this did make her fret ... very much.

~ Sixteen ~

CHERRY HAD WATCHED Sky and Freddy leave together, and she had bit her lip with concern. They had both looked so gravely serious, so determined. What had passed between them in the study? Where were they going? What was going on? And—why, oh why, weren't they home yet?

It was nearly time for high tea, and Cherry began to pace. The twins came skipping into the library where she stood by the large window overlooking the front courtyard. She smiled at them as they plopped themselves on the floor by the fireplace and began playing jacks.

During their play Francine called out, "Famished—aren't you, Miss Cherry? When shall we have tea?"

"Aye," Felix agreed. "Do we have to wait for Sky and Freddy? Can't we have tea brought in, Miss Cherry? My stomach is rumbling."

However, at that moment, Cherry caught sight of the two in question and clapped her hands together. "Here they are now." She noticed both men were looking a great deal happier than when they had left. Sky was in fact rubbing his gloved hands together and then taking up Freddy's arm as they vanished out of sight at the front door. Cherry moved to the bell rope and rang it for tea.

Freddy strode into the library a moment later, but Sky wasn't with him. Cherry looked hopefully past him and frowned. She tried to stop herself from asking but only succeeded in tempering the anxiousness of her tone. "Isn't his lordship coming in for tea?"

"Sky? Aye," Freddy answered in high spirits, "he'll be here in a moment. Had a letter waiting for him." He moved towards the twins. "Hallo, brats. Did you miss me?"

Francine jumped up and threw her arms around his neck as he bent to kiss her cheek. He then ruffled Felix's hair, and Felix grunted as he pushed his brother's hand away, saying something incoherent.

"Is everything ... better, Freddy?" Cherry eyed him penetratingly.

"I don't mind telling you that I have been a fool, Cherry. Sky is the best of great brothers, and I mean to take care I shan't be any trouble to him in the future. Does that answer your question?"

"Oh yes, Freddy, I am so pleased."

Sky strode into the room, and Cherry felt herself riveted. She couldn't look away from him. He was a magnet of masculinity, yes, but it was her heart that controlled everything she felt. She loved him—with all her being,

she loved him. His dark blue eyes twinkled at her as he returned her stare.

“Well ... I rather thought you would have had tea warmed and ready for us,” he said jovially.

No sooner uttered than a male servant appeared with the tray, laden with delectables. Freddy made a move in its direction, as did Felix, who declared happily, “Fresh tarts! Strawberry tarts!”

* * *

It was some hours afterwards, long after dinner and a game of ducks and drakes, that Cherry announced her intention of seeing the twins to bed. Felix groaned his objections and begged for another game. Francine sighed and said she was sleepy. Sky chuckled and said, “Come on, I’ll take you two up.”

Freddy got to his feet and forestalled him. “No, allow me, Sky. I haven’t had the treat in a long time. Besides, I just remembered a story I don’t think they have heard.” He looked in their direction. “What say you?”

The children echoed their approval in hearty accents, and both Cherry and Sky watched their departure in some amusement. Cherry turned and peeped a look at Sky as she remarked, “I don’t know what you and Freddy talked about, or what you did, but whatever it was, it had a profound effect on him. Why, I thought I would die when he announced his intentions of picking up his books and studying tomorrow. Says he means to make up the work he has missed and get himself reinstated at school!”

Sky put down his snifter of brandy as he moved towards her. He didn’t speak, and she felt her heartbeat begin to accelerate. She began rattling on about dinner, and anything else she could think of, until he stopped in front of her so close she thought she could hear his heartbeat.

She looked up into his blue eyes and unconsciously licked her lips. The moment was inevitable. Their proximity to one another filled the room with a pulsating electric current. The air they breathed seemed warm and seductive. She couldn’t stop him, didn’t want to stop him when he wrapped her in his arms and bent to kiss her. His mouth closed on hers with an eagerness that made her feel as though she were melting into him.

Her response was full, hot-blooded woman. She held him, pressed her body into him, invited him to continue ...

His kiss developed into another, and she thought herself lost to him, to his touch and his kiss, just as she had before when he had taken her to his bed. So much rested on her ability to keep him at bay ...

She was in love with him and wanted him to recognize that what they felt for each other was more than lust. She didn’t want to be a tease, but, for the moment, she had lost control.

Someone wiser, stronger in her mind demanded, *Stop, Cherry—stop!* And she managed to put her hand out and push against his chest. He allowed her to pull away; she knew it was not his style to force a woman.

“Why do you hold out against me, sweetheart?” he said, his voice husky.

Why that should irritate her, she couldn't say, but it did. She knew he wouldn't declare love for her. He wasn't ready for that, yet it felt demeaning. It shook her. She had given in to her desires, and now he thought she belonged to him whenever he wanted. Softly she answered, "Because I must."

He frowned down at her, and his hands dropped to his side. "You must?"

"Proprieties ... my lord, dictate that I get over my ... infatuation with you and behave like the governess that I am."

"It is a bit too late for that," he scoffed.

“Do you think so? I, however, do not.” His words had stung, and she fought to get control over her trembling body.

“You can’t change what happened—you can’t stop what we feel for each other.”

“Lust? I believe that we are not animals and can control it. What happened was obviously a mistake.” She turned and started to walk away.

* * *

Damnation! What was this new turn of events? She couldn’t walk away from him, from what they had together! He wanted her more than he had ever thought it possible to want a woman. He more than wanted her—he damn well liked her, a great deal in fact.

“Cherry ... stay, please ...”

“What then, do you mean to proposition me again with the promise of ‘looking after me’. Should I accept that? Should I take a little cottage and leave my position here as governess? Or do you wish me to carry on as governess during the day and mistress by night? Shall I accept, my lord? Is that what you want?”

Her words cut through him. He felt a cad, and yet, he wanted her ... Damn, but he couldn’t go on this way, wanting and not having her. She wanted him too. He was sure of it. “Stop it!” he snapped at her. “It isn’t like that.”

“Is it not? I rather think it is precisely like that,” she answered and turned away once more. “Good night, my lord.”

“Cherry, don’t go.”

She turned and looked at him, “Yes, my lord?”

“Don’t you see ... don’t you know—we could have so much together, and I would always see to it that you are protected from wagging tongues.”

He saw a flash of anger in her aqua blue eyes as she answered, “I see and understand you very well, my lord. That sort of life would not do for me.”

“Cherry ... love, I don’t know how I can do without you.” He tried taking her into his arms once more, and it took everything she had to pull away. He let her and dropped his hands to his sides.

“You must understand my position, even if you cannot like it,” she offered him.

“I do,” he said softly.

“Good,” she answered promptly. “If you will excuse me then, my lord.”

He watched her move towards the door, but before she could leave he called out to her, “Cherry!”

She turned and cocked her pretty head, and he felt an intake of breath. She was so very beautiful. She had him bewitched was his first clear thought. What was he going to do? She was right. It would be unforgivable of him to take her from the twins. It would be outrageous of him to use her in their home as his mistress—unthinkable. *Hell and fire!* What was he going to do?

A ready answer escaped him. "Nothing ... go on then, go to your room if that is what you wish."

She inclined her head and left him to his thoughts. He waited until she had gone out of sight and hearing, and then he went to the fireplace, threw down the remaining contents of his brandy snifter, and put a fist to his forehead.

* * *

Cherry rushed the stairs and smiled to herself. She had seen something more than lust on his face, something that gave her hope. At the same time, she was in a terrible state of affairs. She was here under false pretenses. Her name was not Cherry Parker, and she did not have to work to make her way in life.

How at this stage was she going to explain herself and her actions? As she readied for bed, she presented herself with several methods of coming clean, and none of them worked for her. He would send her off, angrily, and she would never see the twins or Freddy ever again, and she couldn't bear that. She had already become attached—so attached to them.

What was she to do?

She loved him, and that love was all-consuming. Was she destined to lose him? How could she bear it? Her future at the moment looked bleak. And then she thought of her stepmother. By now, Polly would have written her and eased her mind, but what Cherry had done wasn't fair to her. She had to do something soon—very soon.

* * *

Later, Sky tossed in his large bed. He beat his pillow and slammed his head into it, but sleep would not come. He got up and took a turn about his room, stood by the window, and looked up at the star-filled sky and the crescent moon. However, it only served as a backdrop for the vision of her aqua blue eyes. She was full of such spirit, and that spirit always sparkled in those beautiful eyes.

She had been a virgin ... no other had touched her, and it excited him to know. His hard-on raged with the memory of their night together. How could he go on without more of her?

There was something in the way she moved ... and those full breasts made his mouth water ...

He wanted her, he needed her, and by damn, he was going to find a way to have her for his own.

"You are about to get engaged ... are in fact, very nearly engaged, if the chit ever gets well ... so what are you doing, Sky—just what the hell are you doing?" he asked his empty room.

He didn't know the answer to that, and for a moment wondered if there

was a way to retract his offer. Could he cite Miss Elton's prolonged illness? He could, couldn't he? He had to give this some thought.

Something else nagged at him, had been nagging at him from the day he had met Cherry Parker. She didn't seem to be the person she pretended to be. Her speech was too refined. Her mannerisms displayed extensive grooming. She had the sophistication a young woman could only acquire after a few London seasons—the kind that came from traveling with the beau monde. Who really was this Cherry Parker? For he was certain that the name Sarah Parker was not hers.

What he needed to do was leave for London, get matters under control, and do a little digging.

Having made his decision did not, however, bring him any immediate sleep, and he did not doze off until the early hours. When he awoke, it was with a start. He rushed through his morning coffee in his room, bathed, dressed, and hurried directly to the stables. He didn't want to see Cherry. What he needed was some distance to get things into perspective, and he was going to find out more about her—because he was damn sure she wasn't who she said she was!

~ Seventeen ~

POLLY CORBETT (MORE recently Polly Adams) heard the sound of a horse's hooves on pebbles and moved to her lead-paned kitchen window. "Now who can that be?" she asked her husband, who was sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a cup of tea.

He smiled indulgently and sipped his tea with a mild shrug of his shoulders as he continued to peruse his morning *Chronicle*.

"Mercy, if it isn't Lord Dartford," Polly exclaimed. "Harry ... love ... 'tis James. Oh no, what shall I do?" She was already adjusting her mobcap on her gray curls, rushing her hands over her full white apron, and turning in place.

"Come to see you, has he?" was her husband's indulgent response to her panic. "Very nice, very nice indeed."

"Yes, but he must be here about Cherry ... I know it ... I just know it," she said, wringing her hands and pacing.

"Ah, then 'tis time," her husband returned reasonably.

"No, it isn't time, my love. I promised her ... I can't break a promise," Polly wailed.

A knock sounded at the kitchen door, and Polly hurried to open it wide, smiled, and dropped a curtsy. "My lord," she began formally.

"My lord, be hanged!" James responded jovially as he threw his arms around her and planted a kiss upon her cheek.

She blushed and pulled away, indicating her husband, who sat and watched with keen interest. Introductions were made, and James took a seat as Polly poured him some tea and pushed a biscuit at him.

"Zounds, woman, you were wont to call me scamp, brat, and whippersnapper. We can't stand on ceremony now."

"Absurd boy!" She laughed. "Drink your tea and tell us why you are here."

"I shall drink my tea, but I rather think you know why I am here," he said reasonably as he sipped the hot brew and sat back against his wooden chair.

Polly sighed, and he frowned at her and urged, "It won't do, Polly. Better let me save her from this new mess."

"But, I promised ... I gave her my word."

"Silly thing to do considering what she was doing," James chided unmercifully but still in good spirits. "Can't set her loose in the world and then let her be. By now she no doubt wants to come home and needs to find a

way to do so.”

“What do you mean?” Polly puzzled up at him.

“Well, she can’t go home if she thinks her stepmama is going to marry her off to a stranger. Don’t blame her for that—*egad*, the thought of anyone making me marry a stranger is terrifying.” He shook his head. “And knowing Cherry, she’ll never give up. She’ll hold out, she will. So fine, but I tell you what, by now, she must want to go home, and I’m just the one to help her. I’ll go fetch her—just tell me where she is.”

“But then she will have to marry that man, the one she ran away from,” Polly wailed as she wrung her hands.

Her husband reached over and patted her shoulder. “His lordship makes sense, love.”

“She won’t have to marry him. We’ll fix that right and tight, see if we don’t.” James grew impatient. “Just tell me where she is, Polly. There is no time to lose.”

“I simply cannot break my promise ...”

“You must, Polly. The scandals she has flung about in the past are nothing when compared to the scandal that will ensue if word gets out about her running away. I have to bring her home, for her sake. Now where is she?” James pursued.

“No ... I shan’t tell you. I gave her my word, and that is that.” Polly was adamant.

“However, I did not give her mine, and to my way of thinking, his lordship is in the right of it. He must go fetch her before she is ruined and, love ... you know it to be a fact.” Harry turned to James “Miss Cherry Elton has given her name as Sarah Parker and is serving as a governess at Bromley Grange.”

“Upon my soul!” young Lord Dartford murmured.

* * *

Felix scrambled over the paddock fence and called to his pony, Spike, who took one look at his young master and ran to the far side of the field. Surprised and irritated, Felix turned to his assembled group and shouted, “Do you see? He is a beast!”

“You must not allow him to get away with it, Felix, or he shall do it every single time.” Francine moaned.

Cherry smiled, folded her arms across her middle, and said to Freddy, who was standing beside her, “Perhaps a small bucket of grain will do?”

“Aye.” Freddy laughed. “I’ll go fetch it and be back in a moment.”

“Come here, Spike, come on then,” Francine coaxed as she put her hands towards him.

Felix copied her style, and they both cooed to the pony, who eyed them thoughtfully, threw up his head, and charged between them, nearly knocking them down.

“Drat you, beast of beasts!” Felix shouted after him. “You’ll be sorry when I get you, and get you I will!”

“Don’t tell him that, Felix, or we’ll never catch him!” Francine wailed.

Felix went on grumbling about his pony’s infidelity until Cherry laughed and said, “Come on then, sport, what do you expect? Here he is grazing on green grass, free to do as he pleases, and he knows once you catch him, all that will be over.”

Felix inclined his head proudly. “Aye, he is smart, but Sky says that our horses are fed and cared for and the little work we give them is good for them.”

“So it is.” Cherry’s mind immediately wrapped itself around Sky’s image. She didn’t want to think about him though. His leaving so suddenly had her confounded and worried. Had he gone off to satisfy his sexual needs in London? This notion filled her with jealousy, and she turned her concentration towards the twins.

“Here!” called Freddy returning with the grain. “Watch Spike change his tune now, Felix.”

Spike heard the shuffle of grain in the bucket, and his ears picked up. Felix dropped his hand into the bucket, came up with a fistful of grain, and slowly dropped it back into the bucket. This temptation proved to be too much for the pony; he loped over with a short whinny and ate from Felix’s hand. Francine quickly hooked him to a lead line, laughed, and threw her arms around him. “You horrid pony, but we love you.”

Freddy played with the pony’s lovely, dark mane. “Silly old thing ... now you’re caught, aren’t you.”

“He doesn’t really mind,” Cherry said on a short laugh and then turned at the sound of a horse’s hooves in the drive.

Her eyes opened wide, and she gasped as she saw who it was atop a lovely dapple gray. *Oh no, oh faith, oh no.* What was she going to do? It was her dearest friend, James Dartford, grinning and riding right towards them!

How could this be? Polly was the only one who knew, and Polly would never release her whereabouts without her leave—never!

James rode right up to the group now looking at him with avid interest as he easily dismounted his horse and, with the reins in hand, strode up to the fence line. He nimbly jumped over, threw the reins around the rail of the fence, walked purposely up to Cherry, and scooped her up with one arm. “Here you are, you brat of brats!” he said in way of greeting.

Very much to Freddy’s surprise and chagrin, Cherry sank into the stranger’s embrace and happily responded to his greeting, “Oh, James, you dreadful man, I am so very pleased to see you, even though you have no right to be here, and I am very, very upset with Polly!”

“Hush, girl. Polly did not give you away—it was her new husband. Here now, gather up your things, and I will take you home.”

She pulled away from him, aware that the twins had suddenly become

somber as they frowned up at them. Stomping her foot, she wagged a finger. "Indeed, I will not."

"Hold a moment!" Freddy stuck in, now feeling his jurisdiction. "Miss Sarah is not going anywhere with you or anyone else."

"Miss Sarah, is it?" He eyed her with a smile. "Well, well is she not?" James challenged, fire lighting in his green eyes. "Well, we shall see about that." To Cherry, he said, "It's no good, old girl. You must come home."

"I can't, James. Don't you understand? Mama wants me to marry a man I have never even met! I don't even know his name, and she is adamant. She gave him her word, made a marriage settlement, means to post the banns. I won't marry a man I don't love—I simply won't."

"Good God, Miss Sarah ... er Miss Cherry ..." whispered Freddy. "Don't you worry. No one shall take you from Bromley and force you into a marriage you don't want. You are under Bromley protection!" He glared defiantly at James, who was a good four inches taller and somewhat broader as well.

James smiled. "Good boy!" He winked at Cherry. "Plucky, ain't he? Well, you have a friend in him, but tell him, do, that you have a friend in me as well."

"How can I when you have come to fetch me to ... to a fate worse than —"

"Cherry!" He clucked at her. "Don't go melodramatic and missy on me." He whooped with laughter. "I know you too well, and I haven't come to fetch you anywhere but home. I shan't let anyone, not even Lady Elton, marry you off. You have my word of honor."

"Miss Cherry, who is this person? Who is Lady Elton, and why should she want to marry you off? Shall I send him off our property?" Freddy frowned.

Cherry peeped, "James, you deserve to be thrown off the premises for coming here and *not* minding your own business. I daresay you would not have liked it if the situation were reversed." She put up her hand to stop his retort and turned to Freddy. "This is Lord James Dartford, and he is my dearest friend. We go back practically to the cradle."

She eyed James. "And this is Lord Frederick Bromley and the twins, Francine and Felix. I am their governess and very happy to have the position."

"So it is true. When Polly's husband told me I could scarcely credit it, and Polly would not confirm it. Said she had nothing to say on the subject. *Famous!* Damn, if you aren't up to every rig, you sly vixen," James uttered in an admiring tone.

"I don't think he should speak to you like that," Freddy said. "Shall I land him a facer?"

"No, no, Freddy ..." Cherry laughed. "He really is a good sort. His want of conduct stems from the fact that we have been at one another forever." She eyed James mischievously. "You might as well leave, for I shan't go home, and that is final."

“Yes, but that is the one thing you must do ... immediately,” James answered seriously.

“No, I must not. For one thing, the twins need me.” She looked towards them, and they were vigorously nodding their heads. “I just won’t leave them ... yet—I can’t. Besides, whoever it is I am supposed to marry will get tired of courting someone who isn’t there, and then I can safely return and be comfortable.”

“He thinks you are ill and in bed,” James answered with a frown.

“Does he? Then why does he still wish to marry me?”

“Stupid girl, he thinks it some mild malady, and he has himself been out of town, your stepmama told me. You must come back, vixen. Think of the scandal.”

“I see. Well, the solution is this. Return to my stepmama and tell her that if she retires to Elton Place in the country, away from curious eyes, it will avoid a scandal and perhaps put off this relentless suitor.”

“Selfish brat. How can you do this to her?” James responded roughly.

Cherry’s eyes glinted. “She started this mess by trying to force me into marriage.”

“She won’t force you if you return.”

“I don’t trust her any longer, James.”

“Cherry, she is sorry for it, all of it. She thought she was arranging a wonderful match for you.”

Cherry sighed. “I know and forgive her, but first I have something here that I must accomplish. Go home, James.”

Freddy and the twins had been listening to the exchange with rapt interest, but at this juncture Freddy stuck in, “Shall I throw him off the premises *now*, Miss Cherry?”

“No. We had better take him into tea and forget about the ride for now.” Cherry laughed and then looked up at Dartford. “And by the way, wherever did you get that dapple? He is a prime one, isn’t he?”

“I must say,” Freddy agreed with a nod. “Miss Cherry is right on that. He is magnificent.”

“Isn’t he though? Picked him up in Northumberland last month. That’s what took me so long getting back to London—wanted to bring him along slowly. And while I was attending to the business of horseflesh you were raking up scrapes all over town and then vanishing in the middle of the night. Need some taming, you do, Cherry my girl.”

“Do I? Perhaps I just need purpose.”

“And have you that here?” he asked, his brow up.

Francine slipped her hand into Cherry’s, and Cherry smiled. “I do.”

~ *Eighteen* ~

THANKS TO JAMES, her secret was out. Freddy and the twins had demanded over tea to be told the ‘truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’ Cherry had complied, even telling them that a kindly gentleman had given her a ride to her nanny’s.

They were understandably shocked, thrilled, flabbergasted, and totally enthralled. Francine hugged Cherry and said, “My poor, poor Miss Cherry ... having to go through all that. You are so very brave.”

Felix had nodded. “Aye, knew it from the start, a right ‘un.”

Tea had been consumed and the tray laden with delectables cleared during the lively discussion that ensued, and it was with some regret that James stood up and announced, “Well, then, as you won’t return with me, I shall set myself up at the local inn.”

As it turned out that was precisely what he did, and he became a constant and most welcome visitor at Bromley.

Once Freddy established that no danger to his precious Miss Cherry existed, he was very willing to fall under James’ easy charm, and the two became fast friends. The twins found they too, enjoyed the newcomer, for he was certainly lively.

Three days had passed since Sky had left for London, and Cherry would have been devastatingly heartsick had she not both James and Freddy to pick up her spirits with their antics.

James, however, knew her very well, and he was not fooled by her false air of merriness. They were sitting on the stone bench by the duck pond watching the twins feed the ducks when he asked, suddenly serious, “What is it, Cherry? Why so blue-deviled?”

“Not so,” she answered quickly, too quickly.

“This is me you are talking to, my child,” he responded on a superior note. “Can’t fool me.”

“Child indeed!” She attempted to divert the subject.

“I have eight months on you and a vast deal more experience, and besides, *I am* a man.” He put up his hand to halt the tirade he could see she was about to let loose on him. “That’s right, superior, my dear, in every way, as you are but a woman.”

His teasing was mitigated with a brotherly kiss dropped on her nose. “Now, tell me, what has you so low?”

“Naught,” she answered quietly. She had always confided in James. She had told him about her first kiss and every kiss after that, much to his jibes and lectures. She had told him about every scrape and lark she had ever kicked up, including all her notorious adventures in London. She had never held back before. But how could she tell him that she was in love with Sky and had broken all the rules ...?

“Indeed?” He was taken aback and slightly hurt by her reticence.

“It is just so very difficult to speak about ...” She allowed the sentence to trail off. Something kept her in check. She couldn’t speak about her feelings for Sky and have James tease in his usual fashion. This was not larking—this was something else altogether.

“Is it?” He prompted her to go on. “Try one word at a time. One sentence following another. It often works.”

“I can’t this time, James ... I just can’t,” she answered and felt the heat enter her cheeks.

“Damnation, boy!” James was on his feet and rushing towards the pond. “Don’t go on those rocks!”

Too late. Felix’s foot had already slipped on the slimy surface, causing him to do a split between two rocks. He released a yell of some proportions, lost his balance, and went bodily into the pond.

A great deal of commotion ensued because of this mishap, and for some hours afterwards Felix’s escapade was the butt of much joking. Cherry’s blues were set aside for a time, but only for a time.

* * *

The next morning brought James boldly into the breakfast parlor. He was heartily greeted by all and told to join them at the table. He declined, advising them that he had been up for hours, breakfasted earlier, and was now ready for a tour of Bromley lands.

Freddy jumped up immediately. As of late, it had been evident that he had taken on a new sense of responsibility, and this excursion was just what he needed to lighten his mood. He had remarked to Cherry more than once that her friend James was a top sawyer Corinthian.

“Right you are!” Freddy agreed, going towards the doors.

Cherry laughed as she waved them off. Her depression once again descended, but time was limited, and she hadn’t enough to spare for that. She had the twins and their lessons to attend to for the remainder of the morning, but although she went through the motions, it was not with her usual enthusiasm.

It was nearly noon as she ushered the twins into the dining room for a meal of cold collation. They took to munching, but Cherry only picked at her food.

Francine watched her and said, “What you need, Miss Cherry, is a visit to see the baby ducks. We were there first thing this morning when you were

busy with something or other, and they are so adorable.”

Cherry smiled indulgently and agreed to it when the dining room door opened and both James and Freddy strode boisterously inside.

“Well,” Cherry said, laughing, “don’t you both look ... er ... healthy.” She eyed them up and down, for both young men looked a bit disheveled.

“We raced, you see,” Freddy explained, going to the sideboard table for a plate.

“Did you?” Cherry sensed more to the story.

“For the ... love of a woman,” James put in with a hand to his heart.

“Never say so,” Cherry returned on a giggle.

“Indeed. Said she would have the winner, and she did!” James chuckled.

Freddy blushed brightly, and Cherry looked into his eyes and said, “And there, Freddy, you swore me love to your last breath or some such nonsense, not so very long ago. Men ... such fickle beings.” Laughter was in her eyes and at the corners of her mouth.

“Yes, well, it wasn’t my fault, and I didn’t win her. James did.”

“James ... et tu, Brute?”

“No, no. I won her, but I gave her to Freddy.” He was grinning broadly. “Ain’t in the petticoat line, as you well know. Besides, she wasn’t in my style ...”

“Freddy?” Cherry teased unmercifully. “What have you done?” She now put a hand to her heart. “You are a dreadful heartbreaker ...”

“One doesn’t kiss and tell, Cherry—you know that,” James stuck in.

Freddy threatened him with a fork, and much jesting followed, so that no one noticed as a tall, striking man entered the dining room to survey the scene.

Felix was the first to exclaim, “Sky—well met, brother!”

Cherry almost gasped as she turned around and found his dark blue eyes all over her. She did in fact stop breathing for a moment. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed James, who looked from her to his lordship with a puzzled frown.

James moved to Cherry’s side. “Don’t worry, girl, I’m here,” he offered in way of protection.

She turned and looked up at him doubtfully. What could he mean? He further confused her by adding, “I had no idea, Cherry, that Lord Westbrooke was somehow connected to Bromley ... no idea at all.”

“Why should that matter?” she asked in an aside and a whisper. She noted Sky was looking from her to James with a growing dark expression. What was happening here?

Sky was diverted by Felix. He picked his young brother up and then put him down with a pat to his head. He then dropped a kiss on Francine’s waiting cheek before she hugged him round his waist. Then once again his dark blues found Cherry’s bright aqua eyes.

Sky sucked in air. He had to catch his breath. He had to get his feet on the ground. The sight of Cherry made him feel weak and stirred him all at once. How was it possible for one woman to affect him so profoundly?

“Welcome home, my lord,” Cherry said as she stepped towards him and inclined her head, though his lordship noted how she glanced towards the young man by her side.

“Welcome home?” The young man repeated this and frowned down at Cherry as though no one else were in the room. “What do you mean? Are you already acquainted with Lord Westbrooke?”

“Why, of course. He is the twins’ guardian,” she answered briskly.

“Yes, but ...” And then he went silent with his thoughts.

“Thank you,” Sky answered her with a look at the man.

“Sky, we are going to go and have a look at the ducklings. Want to join us?” Francine pulled on his jacket sleeve.

“You two go on. Perhaps I’ll join you in a bit,” he answered, looking towards the stranger again. He looked familiar, and Sky rather thought they had met somewhere. What was he doing at Bromley, and why did he stand so possessively beside Cherry?

Cherry moved suddenly and said, “Where are my manners? Lord Dartford—James, who is my very dear friend.” She smiled at him and then at Sky. “His lordship, Skyler Westbrooke.”

Sky felt a pang of jealousy rattle his composure. He stood speechless for a moment as his mind went over the possibilities. He felt his teeth grit against one another. What the devil did she mean, her ‘very dear friend’? What sort of friend? Damn, but he stood too close to her ... she smiled too sweetly at him ... what the hell was all of this?

A black mood descended over him, and he was scarcely civil as he moved towards Freddy and made a fist to softly hit his shoulder. “Well, brother ... you look fit.”

“Aye, James and I have just had a great outing.”

His lordship’s mood blackened. Apparently the entire household was enthralled with this new interloper. He wouldn’t have it. He started towards the door. “I think I’ll go look in on the twins and the ducklings.”

“I’ll come with you, Sky,” Freddy said cheerily as he fell into step with him.

Sky looked back at Cherry. Leaving her alone with the interloper was not what he had in mind, but now there was nothing for it. He grumbled something, and Cherry found herself alone with James.

* * *

“Whew, Cherry ... I can’t believe it,” James said, his voice hushed. “Don’t you know who that is?”

She laughed. “Yes, he is Lord Westbrooke. James, whatever is the matter?”

Felix came running in and blurted hurriedly, "Sky says you are missing a wonderful sight, and you are. Come on then, Miss Cherry ... the ducklings are all moving about!"

She laughed and started after him, frowned, and turned towards James. "Talk to you later, yes?"

"Yes, go on then ... we'll talk later because we must."

She cocked a look at him then, a bit taken aback and just a bit curious as she followed Felix to the 'duckling habitat'.

Sky walked towards her and touched her arm as she entered the enclosure that had been hastily erected for the ducklings. "Precious things," she said softly as she watched the ducklings play with each other.

"Hardly," Sky answered with a chuckle. "However, the twins are fascinated with them. Francine told me in that 'grown-up' way she has about herself that they were 'utterly divine'."

They laughed together, and Cherry found it a good moment to bring up the subject she had on her mind. "My lord, a notion has occurred to me that I should like to discuss with you."

"Certainly," he said as he fell in step with her.

"I think it would do the twins a great deal of good to spend some time in London. There is much to be learned in town that is important to their education." She discovered that she couldn't look away from his warm blue eyes. She felt as though he couldn't look away from her.

He had clasped his hands together at his back, and she could feel his restraint. Did he want to take her into his arms? Did he want to kiss her as much as she wanted him to?

He said softly, "An interesting proposition. I shall consider it."

"Thank you." She stopped then and felt a moment's awkwardness. She could find nothing else to say, so she moved to return to the children and the ducklings.

He stopped her. "Is that all, Cherry?"

She smiled. "Should there be more?"

"How did you go on while I was gone?" He answered her question with one of his own.

She laughed. "We managed."

"Ah, even with Felix's escapade?" His eyes twinkled.

"You know then?"

Sky chuckled. "Felix told me about his adventure. He enjoyed it immensely."

"Oh, Sky, I wish you could have seen his face before and after. It was so comical. But he was such a good sport and took a great deal of ribbing from Freddy and James."

"Ah, I was forgetting James." Sky stopped and looked at her intently. "An old flame come to visit?"

"An old friend," she said and looked away to find James coming towards

them. She could see a thoughtful expression on his face as he spanned the distance and wondered what he was thinking.

“Hallo,” he called out with a wave.

“Oh no, James, never say you are leaving us already?” Cherry exclaimed.

“No choice. Time ran away with me. Freddy has to hit his books, and I am promised to friends in Southampton, just a bit down the road. Drop in on your tomorrow, sweetheart.” He nodded at Sky and went after his horse. To Cherry it was obvious he had a great deal on his mind. “Must speak with you, privately ...”

He looked to be disturbed by something, and she couldn’t imagine what; however, he might now think it time to start trying to talk her into returning to London. And the truth of it was, she admitted to herself, he was right.

~ *Nineteen* ~

TRUE TO HIS WORD, James arrived the next morning in time to join the Bromleys at breakfast. He piled his dish high with food and kept a lively banter going with both Freddy and Cherry. During this time, Cherry caught him eyeing Sky in what she could only assume he thought was a discreet manner. She knew him, and it wasn't discreet at all. Something about Sky troubled him.

Then if that were not enough to make her nervous, she noticed Sky watching James from time to time. They appeared like two bucks about to challenge for territory ...

She wondered hopefully if Sky was jealous. He couldn't know she and James were more like brother and sister. She had never had the pleasure of a sibling, nor had he, and from their early days that was how they saw one another. Sky couldn't know that, she mused to herself.

Suddenly Sky put threw down his napkin and pushed away from the table. Cherry said, "Leaving us already?"

"No, just stretching my legs." He smiled at her.

She blushed because the look in his dark blues flashed through her. She could feel his desire, and it matched her own. When he moved near her chair, his thigh brushed against her shoulder and she felt a spark sizzle through her blood.

She looked across the table to see James studying her face with great interest and hurriedly looked away. He would know. He knew her too well, and he would guess that she was 'taken' with Sky Westbrooke at the very least.

A moment later she was gathering up the twins and ushering them off with her to the schoolroom for lessons. Felix grumbled, but Francine skipped happily along.

"She is really good with them," James remarked thoughtfully. "Absurd chit—who would have thought it?"

"What is that you say?" Sky rounded on him, wondering what the devil the scamp meant talking about his Cherry in that familiar way.

"Well ..." James attempted to cover his slip. "What I meant was that, well, Cherry and I have been friends ever since we started toddling about ... same age nearly ... and well, I have never before realized how capable she is with children. Most charming."

“Miss Cherry is more capable than most women in her position,” Sky returned frostily, liking James much more than he wanted to.

“Right. Well,” James answered as he got to his feet. “I think I’ll go join them in the schoolroom and watch her in action.”

“What?” Sky shouted, irritation covering his face.

“Oh, I know the way,” James replied lightly, already out the door.

Sky turned to his brother and noted to himself that Freddy had been strangely quiet during this entire exchange.

However, at this juncture Freddy said, “Getting damned possessive of our little governess, aren’t you, Sky?”

“Impudent boy. I don’t think so ... just making certain she has our protection,” Sky said carefully, but he couldn’t miss the look in his brother’s eyes—the look of sudden thoughtfulness.

Freddy pushed away from the table and got up. “He is the best of good fellows, Sky ... don’t know why you dislike him.”

Sky stared at him for a long moment. Was Freddy goading him? “He may be that, but it seems to me he is here to take Miss Cherry away from us—away from the children, I mean.”

“Is that what you think? Well, he won’t because he can’t. He tried already—Miss Cherry wouldn’t go.”

“What?” Sky exclaimed. “How do you know?”

“I was there, the first day he arrived. Came here to take her back with him. She wouldn’t go—said the twins needed her. So you don’t have to worry. Said she wouldn’t go until the twins were able to get on without her, and the way I see it, they never will be. Very attached to her.”

Sky began to pace. So it was true—this Dartford fellow had come to steal his darling, his very own ...? He couldn’t, wouldn’t put the word to that sentence. Was he wrong to want to keep her? Dartford was titled; he was young and wealthy and could take care of her.

He had found nothing about a young woman by the name of Sarah Parker, other than the Parker family was one very respected. Country gentry. Dartford had no doubt offered her marriage. It was the only thing he would offer in front of Freddy and the twins. Marriage ... a thing Sky could not offer because he had virtually promised himself elsewhere.

Cherry was going to be lost to him. With this burning notion in his brain he made his way to the stairs, turning only once to note to himself that his brother had a very odd smile crossing his face. He ignored it because he was going to damn well join the party in the schoolroom.

* * *

The twins were quietly working on a writing assignment when James appeared and cocked a brow, indicating to Cherry that he wanted private speech with her. She went with him into the hall and whispered, “What is it, James? You have been acting oddly since yesterday.”

“Cherry—we need to talk. There is something you have to know.”

“Now?” She was surprised.

“Obviously we can’t talk ... really talk right now, but soon, very soon. There is something I must tell you, for if I don’t, I think you might kill me, and rightly so.”

“James ...” She put her hand on his arm. “What is the matter? You had better give me a clue as to what this is all about.”

The sound of approaching footsteps brought both their heads around. They looked guilty as hell, and Cherry knew it. Talking secrets always made one look anxious and guilty.

Sky’s temper displayed itself on his face and in his movements as Cherry watched him. This was confirmed to her by his voice, hard and dry. “Do I intrude?”

“Not at all,” Cherry returned hurriedly, perhaps too sharply. “James was just taking his leave of me. Weren’t you, James?”

“Aye, aye ... till later then.” He started down the hallways, but it appeared to both Cherry and Lord Westbrooke that James had the look of a man who felt as though he had left something in the wind. His steps were precise and slow, as though he had a great deal on his mind.

Cherry suddenly said, “Excuse me, my lord ... I just remembered something I want to tell Lord Dartford before he leaves.” She rushed after James and stopped him at the head of the stairs to whisper, “I shall meet you at the spinney near your inn at five o’clock.”

“Right. Good girl,” he said, obviously pleased with the plan.

Cherry turned and walked back towards the schoolroom, all too aware that Sky’s luscious blue eyes watched her every move. She gulped like a child about to face an irate parent. He had such power over her senses—all her senses. She managed to deliver a half-smile and said, “Did you come up here to see me, my lord?”

“Indeed, I thought I did,” he answered coldly. “However, I find that you are busy, and whatever I wanted ... no longer seems important.” He turned away from her and started off.

This was not what she wanted ... a little jealousy to wake him up to what he wanted, *well, yes*, but so jealous that he was able to walk away from her? *Oh, no.*

“My lord,” she called after him.

He stopped, but his jaw seemed clenched and his posture had an iron look that said, *I am firmly giving you up.* “Y-es?”

“Nothing,” she said softly and went into the schoolroom. This was ridiculous, she told herself. What was wrong with him? He had no right to claim her in any conceivable way. He didn’t know that she was anything but a woman who had to make a living as a governess at the mercy of the family that hired her. He thought her a governess, and it hadn’t stopped him from taking her to his bed! He was the one who took off for London without a

word. He was the one who thought her beneath a marriage proposal ...

And he was the one who commanded all her thoughts and all her feelings!

* * *

James was pacing like a lunatic. It was already five minutes past five o'clock, and wasn't that just like the brat to keep him kicking up his heels? However, just as he was beginning to worry that something had gone wrong, he saw her slowly steering her horse through the sparsely wooded field at the back of the inn. She jumped nimbly down and, reins in hand, started walking towards him.

"Well, 'tis about time, madcap!"

"I got here as fast as I could. Sky seemed to be hanging around the stables. I had the devil of a time trying to get away without his seeing me."

"What difference does it make whether he sees you leave or not? For pity's sake, Cherry, even a governess may have personal time off, and you are Miss Elton of Elton Grange."

"Oh, James, you don't understand," she clasped her hands fretfully.

"I don't understand? Dunce, it's you who has lost your reason. Look, m'girl, you don't know who Westbrooke is!"

"What sort of a thing is that to say?" Cherry returned, puzzled.

"You didn't take the time to find out who your stepmama matched you with. Well, let me tell you, had you known, you would not have run away!"

"Oh, really?" Hands went to hips. "What makes you so cocksure, you wretched thing?"

"I ain't blind, Cherry-girl. I saw the way you looked at him," James replied a bit pugnaciously.

"I believe you are mad," Cherry returned, wagging a finger at him. "Must be the fresh country air—it has gone to your head!"

"Stupid little madcap!" He laughed amiably. He held her shoulders then just to keep her from jumping about. "It is Westbrooke ... don't you see? It is Westbrooke."

"What is Westbrooke? What are you trying to tell me?"

"You are engaged to marry him, dunce. He has just returned from London, where he went to check in with his intended bride, only to be told she is ill above stairs. He returns here, where he makes eyes at you. It is all really funny when you think about it."

Cherry was struck dumb. She couldn't think, she couldn't move, and she couldn't speak. She stood like a stock until James shook her a bit and called her name. She clutched at him as though she were falling and needed him as a lifeline. "Are you telling me that ... that Lord Westbrooke has asked for Miss Elton's—my hand ...?"

"Precisely." James was well pleased with himself.

She recalled the night they had met when he was in his cups. So that was what it was all about? He was supposed to meet his fiancé the next morning!

Ha! "That means I am actually engaged to Lord Westbrooke ..." She was speaking more to herself than to James.

"Again, precisely."

"Hush. I must think."

"You should be happy. Any dunce can see you both want each other." James frowned.

"Well, I am not happy. James, I have deceived him. If I honor the engagement, he will never know if I am marrying him for the right reasons. I want him to know it is for love, for you are quite right, I love him—desperately. Oh James, I must leave for London immediately. I will have to quarrel with him and get myself dismissed. And the twins ... I shall take them aside and tell them all."

"Hmmm. Problem there—you really shouldn't leave the twins in the lurch."

"I won't be. Freddy will look out for them in my absence. I shall find them just the sort of governess they need ... someone like Polly ... and will make certain she is hired for the twins."

"Yes, but they love you, Cherry."

"Don't you think I love them? I do. I shall never give up visiting with them if my plan doesn't work, and if it does ..." She screwed up her mouth and wrinkled her nose.

"You are mad." He sighed.

"You must be ready to escort me back to London tonight. Can you hire a post chaise for the trip? I don't want anyone to see me riding into London. I have to do this quietly."

"Done. Be back here at seven, and off we'll go," he answered promptly. "I've had a chaise in waiting ever since I found you."

"You are so clever, James," she said. Throwing threw her arms around him, she planted a kiss on his cheek. "Seven it is." She turned, mounted her horse, and hurried him towards Bromley!

* * *

Cherry didn't get very far. Sky Westbrooke sat his horse in the middle of the narrow trail. She saw him and pulled up on her reins, for she had been gently loping down the dirt road. She found herself breathing irregularly and wondered what he was doing there looking so oddly at her. "My lord ... how nice ..." she said lamely.

"Is it—*nice*, I mean?" he asked on a dry note.

"Well, of course—finding myself in your company is always ... er ... pleasant."

"Fine. Shall I escort you home then?" he asked blandly.

She shot an inquiring glance his way but could read nothing from his cold expression. "Thank you."

"Did you have a, er ... *pleasant* visit with your friend Dartford?" he

asked, almost too casually.

“What makes you think I was visiting with James?” she returned, her chin up.

“Weren’t you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I was.”

“I can’t say I approve of such behavior in the governess of my brother and sister,” he said, his voice hard.

“No, of course not. I understand perfectly. You reserve the right to take favors from her yourself.” She turned angry, bright eyes on him. She had done this with calculation: she wanted him upset. She needed a quarrel with him, and he was walking right into it.

He reached out to stop her horse, for she was starting to trot off from him, and said on a low growl, “Hold there, sweetheart!” He did in fact rein in her animal.

“Stop that!” she snapped at him. “I don’t like being manhandled.”

“Then don’t make sharp remarks and then take off. Expect to get as good as you give ...” So saying, he slipped his arm around her waist and drew her to him for a kiss. Their lips barely met when Cherry’s horse objected strongly with a fidget.

She wanted to giggle but instead rode towards Bromley’s drive and the barn. Sky rode after her. When they reached the stables he quickly called a groom to take both their horses and followed Cherry as she started for the house.

“Cherry ... wait,” he called after her. “I should like ten minutes of your time.”

She turned. “Of course, my lord.”

He caught up to her and drew her toward a stone bench along the bluestone path. There he made her sit beside him. “Cherry ... you must know how I feel about you?”

“Must I?” she answered, her brow up. “James tells me that you are engaged to marry Lady Elton’s stepdaughter.” There—she had said it; she waited for his reaction. If he truly loved her, would he say so now? Would he tell her that he was for London to break off his engagement? Would he do the right thing? Or did he still want a mistress in his bed and a lady to run his household?

“How would he know that? Nothing has been finalized or announced—”

“Things have a habit of getting about,” she said sweetly as she looked intently at him.

“Yes, it is true ... but even if I must go through with it, it would be a marriage of convenience ... *nothing more*.” He looked away for a long moment. “Still ... I want you, and I thought ... think, you want me.”

A part of her was outraged. What if she had allowed her stepmama to arrange their marriage? It wasn’t right, and he needed a bit of a lesson, didn’t he? She paused just a moment and then said quietly, “What makes you think

so, my lord?" she said lightly as she played with the skirt of her riding habit.

"Is it that puppy, Dartford?" He sat ramrod straight.

She relented. "No. It is you, it has been you from the first moment you kissed me that night I was running away, but, my lord, I won't be a mistress." So saying, she got to her feet, stomped her foot, and said with a wag of her finger, "And you aren't being fair to Miss Elton either!"

So saying she ran, praying at that moment that he would not follow. She needed to think. She needed to set things straight, and she needed to do it soon. This pretense had to stop. He had not said he would end his engagement, and yet, he still pursued her. It was filling her with contrary emotions.

The time had come to return to her stepmama and make amends. The time had come to untangle things—they had just dipped deeply into mire, and she had to retrieve the situation before it sank beyond her reach.

* * *

He did not follow her. He could not follow her. He felt a cad. He had offered marriage to the young Elton woman—a young woman who deserved more than his name but would never have it because his heart, his soul, his every thought belonged to Cherry. He had to find a reasonable way out of his present predicament. Marriage of convenience was the way of his lot in society, but it was a damnable ugly way...

He didn't care that even Cherry's name was shrouded in mystery. He didn't care that she was governess to the twins. He loved her with everything he was, and he would have to find a way out of the Elton entanglement, because he damn well meant to make Cherry his bride!

~ Twenty ~

“FREDDY!” CHERRY CALLED him out of the library. “Conference, quickly with the twins in the schoolroom. I haven’t any time to spare.”

She didn’t wait for him to ask her any questions but ran to the stairs and then had to control herself from taking them two at a time. Speed. It was all-important that she be gone before Sky confronted her again. She wouldn’t bother packing. Faith, it would be so nice to have her real wardrobe at her disposal once again.

She found the twins playing at a board game in Francine’s room and ushered them to the schoolroom. “We need to talk. Come.”

They sensed something important was afoot and followed her in hushed silence. Freddy met them as they entered, and Cherry closed the door. “Sit, all of you.”

Freddy looked around for somewhere to plant himself, but other than a footstool he could find nothing his size. “Can’t,” he said reasonably.

She giggled and then grew serious. “I have to leave—tonight. Soon, in fact.” She put up her hands as they all began to object.

Francine threw herself at her and hugged her tightly. “Don’t go, Miss Cherry—we couldn’t bear it!”

Even Felix went to her and hugged her. “Please, Miss Cherry ... I will try and not be so bad ...”

“Hush ... bad, indeed. You are the best children any governess could hope to have. I shan’t be gone long ... I promise, but I must go immediately. There is something personal that I must attend to in London. Lord Dartford has offered to escort me safely. I can’t tell you more, other than to assure you that I love you and I need you to trust me. I am doing what needs to be done. Do you believe me when I say I will make everything right?”

“Yes ... but don’t go,” Francine begged.

“Freddy will stay with you, won’t you, Freddy? You will make certain they do their lessons and play and take care of the ducklings and all the things I normally do with them ... yes?”

“Yes, Miss Cherry, and I do trust you. This is just what he needs to see the light,” Freddy said with a soft smile.

Their eyes met and locked, and then she squeezed his hands. “Thank you, Freddy.”

Felix was still hugging her, and she took his hands and held them so she

could bend down to look at him. "You have been wonderful to me, Felix ... and I promise, whatever happens, I shall return—in fact, there isn't a soul that can keep me from you." She sighed heavily and added, "There is a secret that we need to keep between us. I don't wish Sky to know that I have promised to come back. Understood?"

"A secret between us?" Felix said, his eyes lighting up.

"Yes, a secret."

"You can rely on me, Miss Cherry!"

"I shall look after the twins, and I too am pledged to your secret," Freddy promised.

"Then you will come back and be our governess forever?" Francine pursued.

"No, love, but I will come back." She put a finger to Francine's trembling lips. "You and Felix needed me, but I think now you know exactly what you have to do to grow fine and smart and good. What you need is someone who is far more learned than I to get you ready to go off to school in a couple of years. Trust me to choose the right person to fill that office, and then you can train her, when I bring her to you, and before long you will like her as much as you like me."

The twins looked at one another, and then Francine said, "We will never love her as much as we love you—never."

"Never mind—things have a habit of working themselves out." She gave them another hug each. "Secret now!" Cherry turned to Freddy. "Lessons, Freddy. Make them do their letters, speak to them in French, take them on outings, and by the time I get back, it will nearly be time for you to return to Eton."

He laughed. "Miss Cherry ... I ... we shall miss you terribly while you are gone."

"And I you." She touched his cheek. "Now, I am off. If his lordship asks, you may say I left him a letter on my mantelshelf. It is all the explanation I mean to give him."

So saying, she went to her room and quickly penned a missive.

My Lord Westbrooke,

I have enjoyed my stay at Bromley. I adore the twins, and my time with them is something that is very precious to me. However, it is apparent that I cannot remain under the same roof with you, for reasons we both understand.

Forgive me. I have made an explanation to the twins and to Freddy, and I shall send you an exceptional woman to take my place. Yes, I do know someone who would be perfect for the position and perhaps be more appreciated by your new bride.

Again, forgive me, but it seems that running away from things I cannot handle is something I am falling into the habit of doing.

Cowardly but expedient.

Fondly,

Cherry

This done, she put the hood of her cloak over her hair and quietly left the house. It would take her a good twenty minutes to walk the distance to James, but she was on time. Everything seemed to be in order, so why did she feel so very heartsick? This was the answer, was it not? Yes, it was the only answer. Faith, it had to be the answer.

* * *

Sky rode to the inn at a heady pace. It was too late, of course, to stop Cherry from going; she was gone. He knew that—and still galloped his horse because he needed the run. Dusk had turned to night and the moon wasn't quite full, so it was madness to run his horse at this speed. However, he reached the inn and dismounted quickly, giving the reins over to the livery boy who came running out to greet him.

He headed inside to see Mr. Regis, proprietor of the Red Bull Inn and Tavern. Regis was a stout and jolly man. He had long prospered at his establishment and was proud of his success. Sky found him polishing the dark oak bar counter, and he looked up to smile broadly at his lordship. Westbrooke was well known and liked by most of the locals.

"Good evening to ye, my lord," Regis greeted him and put down the cloth.

"And to you, Regis." Sky nodded but was too impatient to waste time on the usual amenities. "Regis, tell me, if you can, is young Dartford still here?"

"No, my lord. He left us a few hours ago. Paid his shot, and off he went. Pleasant young man."

"Do you know if he had any ... company with him when he left?"

"Couldn't say, but he did hire a post chaise. Hitched that fine piece of horseflesh of his to the boot, and off he went."

"Did he mention where he intended to go?"

"London ... aye, that's it. Thanked me, like I said, paid his fare, and said he was off for London."

"London! Well by God, we shall see!" Sky was too hot at hand to think how he sounded as he turned and stomped out of the inn.

~ Twenty-One ~

LADY ELTON RUSHED into the parlor, and Cherry looked up from the tea she was sipping as her stepmama clapped her hands together and then put out her arms. “Darling, you dreadful awful darling! Maria said you arrived last night—why did you not wake me?”

Cherry got up and ran right into them, and for a very long moment the two women hugged without saying a word. “Didn’t want to disturb you, Mama, and before I say another word, I do love you and I am terribly sorry...”

Lady Elton gave her stepdaughter a shake and said, “You are home! ’Tis all that matters.” She looked past Cherry to James and said, “Thank you, James ... thank you for convincing her to come back to me.”

“It wasn’t me,” James said, his hands up in the air. “She decided suddenly that was what she had to do. She is mad, you know, completely and utterly mad.”

“Let me look at you.” Lady Elton held her at arm’s length. “Lovely choice, but oh, my dear, this gown just hangs on you—have you not been eating?” She hugged her again and then took Cherry’s hand and led her back to the sofa. “We’ll fix that right away, my girl, but now tell me, everything.”

“First, Mama ... I am so very dreadfully sorry. I know you only wanted to see me safely settled. I should not have run away ... but if I had not ... well ... at any rate, you do understand, I could not, would not marry a stranger.”

“You are a horrid, wicked girl, and I love you with all my heart. No, I see that now. I don’t know what I was thinking ... but if you had just seen him ... he was everything I want for you.”

“Yes, I agree ... Lord Westbrooke is just the man for me.” Cherry peeped a look at her.

“You agree?” Lady Elton turned to James, who had resumed his seat and was plopping a custard tart into his mouth. “She agrees?”

“Told you,” he said with his mouth full. “Totally mad.”

“Cherry, I repeat, you must tell me everything.”

“Hmmm. My cue to take my leave,” James said brushing off the pastry crumbs from his waistcoat.

“You cannot go—of all the paltry things. You said that you would have dinner with us.”

“No, I didn’t. When I dropped you off last night, I said I would come round in the morning. Came ... ate ... saw you safely in the arms of your dear mama ... and now leaving.”

“James, stay, do.”

“Can’t,” he said laconically.

“Why not?”

“Don’t want to,” he returned glibly and made for the door in time to duck the pillow being flung at his head.

“Cherry, dearest, you may not throw pillows at people,” Lady Elton objected.

“He isn’t people,” Cherry said, laughing.

“Besides, I have this queasy feeling that you are about to receive a guest. Don’t want to be here when you do ...”

They watched him depart, and Cherry turned back to Lady Elton with a sigh. “Well then, Mama, you deserve the truth, and I shall sit with you and tell you all. Then we shall send for Mrs. Epton.”

“Mrs. Epton? Whatever for?”

“I find that I can solve an earlier dilemma with a new one. Put them together, and both shall end quite happily. Mrs. Epton will be perfect for the twins.” She patted the long-suffering Lady Elton’s hand and said soothingly, “There, sit back, and I shall confess things I know you don’t want to hear.”

* * *

Sky discovered that Dartford had lodgings in Kensington Square. He had been on the road for hours and was dusty, tired, hungry, and out of temper. But before he tended to bodily needs, he was going to confront James Dartford and find her ...

As the door to James’ lodgings opened, Sky felt a certain fear grip his heart. What if she was already under Dartford’s protection as his mistress?

The notion made him feel sick to his stomach. Lost to him? No. That was unthinkable. Dartford’s man appeared at the door, and Westbrooke was advised that his lordship had set out for his club, White’s.

Sky could have killed the poor man staring worriedly up at him. He restrained himself, thanked the butler, and hurried down the steps to the urchin holding his horse. He flipped the child a coin, jumped easily into the saddle, and made his way to his own town house in Grovsnor. If James was at his club, then of course Cherry was not with him.

He went about the business of bathing, changed his clothes, and had a bite to eat. He would revisit Dartford at his lodgings later in the day, as he could not very well confront him at the gentlemen’s club.

That Dartford had taken Cherry to London, he was certain; however, he was also certain she was safely being housed and not yet touched. He knew her ... and she didn’t give herself freely—he knew that much because he damn well loved her, with every fiber of his being!

He was going to find her ... bloody hell, he was going to find her, and when he did, he would make her his own, because he knew he didn't want to live without her.

* * *

James entered his lodgings and was given Westbrooke's calling card. His brow went up. "Do you mean to tell me Lord Westbrooke was here ... himself—and asking for me?"

His man nodded, but his words were never heard as the knocker sounded at the door behind him. James opened it himself to find Lord Sky Westbrooke.

Sky inclined his head. Not waiting for an invitation, he strode immediately inside and said, "Dartford—may I have a private conversation with you?"

"Zounds, man, you look the very devil! What is wrong?" James was mildly amusing himself—he knew very well what was wrong and why Westbrooke had come to see him.

However, he led the way to his small study, stood aside, and allowed Sky to enter, saying, "May I pour you some brandy?"

"No, but you can give me some straight answers."

"Can I?"

"Dartford, I am aware that you left with Miss Cherry ... and I am here to bring her back to Bromley."

"Are you?" James smiled kindly. "She doesn't wish to go back at this time."

"What does she wish? To remain in London ... with you?" Sky felt his heart stop as he waited for the answer.

"Not precisely," James answered evasively.

"Dartford, look ... I ... I care for her ... a great deal. When she left it was because I led her to believe that ... that I was only interested in making her my mistress."

"Aren't you?"

"Yes, no—damnation, man ... I was, but now—"

"My Lord Westbrooke, *I care for Cherry*—and I'm telling you that you cannot make her anything while you are engaged to marry Miss Elton, who by the way is also a very dear friend."

Sky was silenced for a moment as he ran his hand through his thick black hair and sighed. "I was forgetting that. Never mind it—I intend to withdraw my offer for the Elton chit. The arrangement was never concluded as she fell ill, the banns were never posted, the settlement never signed. Miss Elton and I have never met ..."

"Good God! You were going to marry a woman you had never met? I can't conceive of such a thing. Can't conceive of marriage for that matter ..."

James mused out loud.

"Only tell me where I might find Miss Cherry. I must speak with her."

“I will, but only after you have settled your affairs with Miss Elton,” James offered gently.

Sky noticed the twinkle in Dartford’s eye and wondered at it, but he dismissed it as he realized the man was right. “At this hour?” he said out loud. He felt as though he was somehow being manipulated and didn’t like it. “I don’t know that Lady Elton will receive me at this hour.”

“It is Miss Elton you have to see, not her ladyship,” James said firmly.

“Yes, but she is ill ...”

“No longer,” James answered.

“Devil you say! How do you happen to know this?” Sky studied James thoughtfully. Something very odd infused all this, but he couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

“Because I paid her a morning visit, and she was quite well.”

“Right then. As you say, I will go and tidy up my affairs, but, Dartford, when I return—no more games. I will have Cherry’s direction.”

“As you say—after you visit Miss Elton, there should be no more games,” James replied, a soft smile curving his lips.

* * *

Cherry pushed away her tea and cake, for she felt restless. She took a tour of the room, swishing the skirts of her pretty yellow day gown. She went to the mirror and played with the dark curls bobbing about her face and wondered what Sky was doing. Did he miss her? Would he come for her as she had planned and hoped?

“Lord Skyler Westbrooke,” the butler announced at the parlor door. She caught her breath and composed herself. He was here. He was actually here.

Sky came in and stopped short. His hat was already off, and he dropped it and left it where it fell. He stuttered her name, took a step forward, then stopped, and said her name again. “Cherry ... I don’t understand—not any of it.”

“No, of course you don’t. What are you doing here, my lord?” Cherry attempted sangfroid, but her heart was beating tremulously.

“I came here to see Miss Elton ... to explain that I can’t marry her.” He frowned. “Cherry ... love, are you related to Miss Elton?”

“You can’t marry Miss Elton?” Cherry clucked her tongue. “Oh dear, just when I was getting used to the idea. Hmmm, in fact, I rather thought I should enjoy being your wife.”

He went to her then and took her shoulders. “What is going on here? Cherry, explain!”

“What shall I explain—that I love you with all my heart?”

He kissed her, groaned, and then set her aside. “Cherry, you ran away from me ... and came here—how are you connected to Elton House?”

“You wanted to make me your mistress. You were getting married and thought to have a piece of muslin on the side. How awful of you! That is no

way to start married life, and I tell you frankly, if that is how you mean to go on ... my answer is no."

"No, I could not go through with it. I came here to make it all right." He eyed her doubtfully and demanded, "My very own fancy piece, what are you doing here? Cherry. Explain, or I shall go mad."

"Well, you say you came here to break it off with Miss Elton, whom you don't even know and might like very well ..."

"Cherry!" he nearly shouted with exasperation.

"As I was saying, I can't be a fancy piece ... nor do I want a husband who keeps a fancy piece," she answered softly.

"*I ... I don't want you to be a fancy piece ... unless you are in my bed ... then I want what we had ... what we have to have again.*" He stopped himself there and interjected, "What do you mean you were getting used to the idea of my marrying Miss Elton?"

"When my stepmama told me she had chosen a husband for me, I didn't even wait to hear *who* he was. I just took off for my nanny's in the middle of the night ... and there you were."

Dawning lit on his lordship's face and in his eyes. He shook her shoulders. "Little devil, my own little devil! You—you are Miss Elton!"

"Yes. I was very wayward, but I shall try to curb such impulses in the future." She went into his arms and held him. "But you are the devil, are you not—seducing an innocent young woman in your care?"

"I wonder who seduced whom?" he said ruefully before setting her aside and saying, "The rest of the story, please?"

"Then James came, and when he saw you he told me who you really were—and I decided then that marrying you was just what I wanted, so I came back to be Miss Elton and hold you to your marriage proposal ... and now, here you are wishing to break our engagement. That is not very nice."

He was laughing and saying her name, and then he was bending and pressing her against him, whispering her name, as he closed his mouth over hers. When he came back up for air he softly asked in her ear, "Why did you not save us both a great deal of trouble and just tell me?"

"I thought I might do better to wake you up to what I thought you actually felt for me ... I wanted you to break it off with poor Miss Elton and declare yourself. Otherwise, how could I ever be sure?"

"You miserable vixen!" he said and kissed her again. When he allowed her air, he murmured, "And the twins ... they knew?"

"I told them almost everything—not quite—but I do mean to bring them an exceptional governess. So what I want to know, my handsome lord, *is our marriage on—or off?*"

He gave her his answer with action, sweet and ardent, and left her with no doubts ... no doubts whatsoever.

~ Epilogue ~

HIS LORDSHIP WAS impatient and convinced his Miss Elton to set a date. As it turned out, she too, was anxious to be married and back in his arms.

Their wedding took place at the end of the month and was a simple ceremony with only their closest friends and family in attendance. Felix made an excellent ring bearer and Francine, a flower girl.

His lordship was only able to convince his Cherry to take a week for their honeymoon, as she was anxious to get back to the children and help along their new governess. She had already paved the way for this transition but needed to see for herself that all went well. Both Felix and Francine were well behaved (at least most of the time) for the new governess.

Before returning to the children, Sky took a detour, and they spent a night at his own estate, Westbrooke Towers.

“One day, Freddy will take a wife, and you and I shall live here. Will you like that?”

“Like that? I shall love it. Oh, Sky, I adore this house—so full of history ... and the gardens ...” Cherry sighed. “But for now ... watching Felix and Francine grow up is all that I really want. And Freddy ... what a change you have brought about in him!”

“Not I, you, my love.”

“It has always been you he looked up to. He just needed a push in the right direction.”

“My wise little darling. One day, you will be using that wisdom for our own children.”

Cherry gurgled, “Hmmm, which means ... we have to get busy ...”

“Busy?”

She eyed the huge four-poster bed just behind them, and he threw his head back with his laugh. “I love you, my lady—adore you and ...” He lifted her cradle-like into his arms.

“Why, sir? What are you doing?” she asked saucily, though she knew full well.

“Whatever you want ...” he answered on a husky note.

*Here's a sneak peak at Claudy Conn's
newest Risqué Regency,
Disorderly Lady (unedited)*

CULLINGHAM GRANGE REPOSED sedately in the lovely Cotswolds. Its tenant farmers enjoyed a good living, as did their baron, the young Sir Brentley of Cullingham. He had inherited the grange, the title, and a modest income at the age of thirteen, when both their parents were killed at sea.

Deep in thought, Bella sighed heavily over her situation with her brother. He had not only inherited the running of the estate, but the running of her life as well. Fifteen! He had only been fifteen, but he had taken it all in stride and until recently had been brother, confident, and friend as well as guardian. As of late, however, he seemed to wear one cap only—guardian. It was most irritating.

Seven years had passed since Bella lost her parents. She had turned twenty and until recently was master of her time. Lately, however, Brent had begun hovering.

He was busy with the estate and happy. He loved the managing of their home, and she did as well, although, lately, she was restless.

Brother and sister's close bond had of course been threatened, she knew, by a man whose image had glittered before her grey eyes and took possession of her lively and active brain.

It had all happened so unexpectedly. Over the years, Bella had never succumbed to the crushes she had experienced over various lads.

She had never suffered more than a flitting infatuation and then only because the blacksmith up at the academy was so very handsome and all her friends were swooning over him.

Kisses she had experienced from a quick peck on the lips, to the very passionate kiss she had with that very blacksmith. Thinking of him now made her smile.

She sighed; all that was over. She was no longer a school girl.

She had returned home, and Brent had given her a country ball in her honor. She had always longed for a London season, but never told him so as she could see he loved being in the country. She did enjoy her home and friends and for most of the time was quite content with life in the country. Ah, but that was before he arrived.

Colonel Holding was one of Brent's friends from Oxford. He had never visited before and when the dashing Colonel sauntered into their lives she felt as though she were being swept away in a torrent of 'feelings'.

From the first moment she saw him, her mind went blank but for one thing—seeing him again, and again.

Brent warned her about his friend. He told her the Colonel was a rogue

and although good-hearted enough, quite a libertine with the petticoats. She knew this was true because she watched the rakish military man while he stole hearts at the country routs. She saw first-hand just how he flirted with all the pretties. This was her fault, not her brother's. She had allowed herself to be turned by a handsome visage, broad shoulders and an all too charming smile. He became an image that was upper most in her mind.

Brent cajoled, as he tried to push her out of his friend's sights, but it did no good at all. All she could hear was the sound of her own young and still quite innocent heart. All she could think about were the colonel's kisses, for he had stolen many wild and provocative kisses from her.

Colonel Holding teased her, flirted with her, and made her feel the woman she had thought she had grown up to be.

Desire flooded into her blood. Most of her friends were either married or engaged. Some of her married friends had given her details of their wedding night...others had shared a bed with their husbands even before they were wed and were very joyously descriptive of what this entailed. She was curious—very curious.

The colonel appeared to be thoroughly taken with the lovely Bella, she had heard Brent say to his friend Doyle, adding that he had seen the Colonel 'thoroughly taken' before and it meant nothing.

She discounted this. Her brother as it turned out, was quite in the right of it. The Colonel's wayward heart beat for himself and no one else.

When their dance was over, the charming Colonel Holding, had, she thought, stolen her heart and without a backward glance, left it, left it damaged. She had watched him take his leave and go on with his regiment without a backwards' glance.

She had encountered her first cad. A cad because he had led her to believe that he loved her...he had said such things to turn her stupid head. She felt utterly a fool.

Even so, she had hoped for a day or two that he would get word to her, explain himself, blame it on 'orders', tell her he sent her round a note that somehow never arrived. That didn't happen.

She heard Brent say to Doyle that it was quite a sin to watch his sister, who, he thought was loveliest girl in all the Cotswolds shut herself away.

She had heard Doyle cluck his tongue and say, "Never mind, she will get over him. Stands to reason. Plucky, our Bella."

She awoke this morning and decided. Enough, time to get up and out.

She dressed in one of her favorite riding ensembles and looked at herself in the mirror. Her flame colored hair dropped in ringlets beneath her black velvet top hat. One white feather curled over one ear. Her white lace ruffles peeped out at her neck and cuffs of the black velvet fitted riding jacket and her black velvet skirt was hiked up slightly and held in place with a button displaying her shiny black riding boots.

There, she told the image in the mirror. You are not such a silly creature

as to go into a decline for such a man. No you are not.

She put a smile on her face and made her way towards the library where she was sure she would find her brother and Doyle with their heads together worrying about her. It wasn't right that she should make them worry. This all had to stop.

*For a change of pace, try a modern-day story
with a time-travel twist:
Through Time—Pursuit*

*~ Prologue ~
Chancemont LeBlanc*

Present day

ALL AT ONCE—he was on her! The Dark Prince Pestale had the Death Sword across her throat, and if her brother moved another step toward her, it would only end in getting her killed.

Chancemont LeBlanc stood rigid and filled with fear for his young sibling, Lana.

And then, right before his eyes, the Dark Prince, grinning all the while, slit young, sweet Lana's throat, and she was forever lost to them.

Thunder rolled through his body then—rolled through it still. His sword vibrated in his hands, feeling his need.

He wanted blood, the Dark Prince's blood, *and he wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything else in his life.*

Fury took over his despair and buried the pain of grief with the hope that he would soon have the Dark Prince in his grip and torture him before he put an end to the Dark Fae's miserable existence. Sorrow—deep, haunting sorrow—filtered through to his heart and blinded him with the all-consuming need to avenge his young sister's death. Guilt shouted out his faults and blamed him for her death—*but guilt was a waste of time.* He replaced that guilt with purpose and became centered in his goals.

Find Pestale, capture Pestale, and drag him to Dravo, where he and his father could inflict pain and punishment on him before putting him out for the buzzards to feed upon.

Thoughts of his father off alone and mourning in silence made him cringe. His father would never get over this loss. He was the Milesian leader, Morgan LeBlanc, a big man that his people on Dravo relied upon.

His da—who he could have passed as his brother, so young was he in appearance—was lost to drink and self-inflicted solitude. Who could blame him?

His da, who had always been a force in Chance's life, was broken by this final loss. And rage filled Chance as he made his plans. Milesians were an immortal race—not born that way, but created by the dust from the Fae World of Danu when that world was destroyed. The dust had come through the portal that brought the Fae to the Human Realm.

Now, their joint loss of Lana would hurt them through eternity.

She was the only daughter, a reminder of the great love his father had for Chance's mother, lost so long ago. Sweet Lana, his bright-eyed baby sister who had not yet reached maturity, with her entire immortal life ahead of her—*until Pestale.*

Revenge? Someone once told him revenge could be sweet. He wasn't certain that was true, but he shouted to the winds, "Revenge canna bring back her laughing eyes, or her dear voice ..." His own voice trailed off, because he needed revenge, for without it—without revenge—he could not attain justice. To Chance the two walked a straight and parallel line.

His father had stopped drinking when he realized what Chance was going to do. He had grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him. "Do ye think I can lose another? Doona go, Chance ..."

"Da, he must not be allowed to live."

"Chance, me own best hope ... doona go ..."

It had nearly stayed him, the distress on his father's face, but the need to avenge his sister's murder was greater. "I must, Da, ye know that."

His father had sighed with acceptance and had talked to him for hours. He told him to be cool-headed in his pursuit. He said with tears in his eyes that revenge and justice were two different things.

Are they? Chance asked the sky, "Are they different? I doona have the answer to that, but I do have my immortal skills, m'magic, and my Death Sword. It will take all those things to find the devil, and to lay hands on him. He is a Dark Fae Prince, the eldest of his brothers—the most cunning of them all, *and I will have his blood,*" he vowed to the heavens and himself.

Two days had passed since they had lost Lana to Pestale's death weapon. Two days since they fought beside the Seelie Fae to bring down Gaiscioch and the Dark monsters. Two days, and Pestale remained alive.

Chance's thoughts were violent as he spoke to Pestale as though he were there. "*There is nowhere ye can outrun me.* I will track ye to the ends of the earth, and beyond if necessary. I have shouted it to the heavens, *I am Chancemont LeBlanc, and I shall have yer filthy Dark Fae blood!*"

Young Seelie Prince Trevor had joined him in this mission, and they would soon make tracks. He couldn't deny the Seelie Fae his place with him, because of Lana's memory. How he had objected to her little romance with the Fae prince, in no small part because Trevor was the younger brother of Prince Dante. Chance and Dante had fought on opposite sides of the war thousands of years ago, and though Fae and Milesians were no longer enemies and had in fact joined forces recently against the Dark Fae, Chance held no love for his former foe and no wish to see his sister falling for a member of the Royal House of Lugh, Dante's brother no less! Now he wished she were with him ... flirting up the lad once again. *Och*, but he could hear her laugh ...

He berated himself. If only he had kept Lana on Dravo ... in chains—it would have taken chains to keep her from the fight, for she had been too headstrong to listen. He should have foreseen this; he should have spelled her

home.

The war with Gaiscioch was over. The Human Realm was safe for the time being. The two remaining Dark Princes had been returned to the Dark Realm, where they would forever remain imprisoned with Queen Morrighu.

Gaiscioch was dead—his evil but a recent memory—but Pestale had escaped and was somewhere in the Human Realm.

It rode him hard and drew blood that Pestale was free! Chancemont's determination went beyond purpose, beyond thought, and took him to a place where all he knew was his need for justice.

So then, Chance had become a hunter.

He would capture the evil prince, and he would make his demands before he put him out of his misery—for he would keep him there, begging for death until he said Lana's name.

And so it began.

~ One ~

Princess Royce of the House of Nimroug

“ROYCE!”

“Trevor!” She turned and tried smiling in spite of what she knew she was about to face on the other side of the door she had her hand raised to. Trevor was one of her closest friends. “What are you doing?”

“Long story—but I guess you know about ... about Lana,” he said grimly.

“My brother told me, and I am so sorry ...” She watched as his jaw stiffened and his face suddenly looked older. He must have fallen hard for Lana LeBlanc.

She reached out and petted his arm but said no more. She didn’t think he needed words. He gave her a crooked smile and sighed heavily. “I am off to meet with Chance, and then we will find the devil ...”

“Yes, Trev, but I heard that he is the oldest of the Dark Princes and very cunning—you *watch your back*,” she cautioned, recalling an incident where he had been braver than he had been wise. She touched his face. “Trev ... he can move in and kill you with the same sword he used on—” She didn’t want to say the name and see the pain in his eyes and quickly changed her warning. “He is ruthless, and you are not.”

“He may be cunning and ruthless, but I am a Seelie Prince of the House of Lugh. Danté taught me everything I need to know, and what he didn’t teach me, Breslyn did. You can rest assured that I am totally equipped as a Tracker and a warrior,” he said with a superior tone.

This pronouncement made Princess Royce laugh. “You are pretty darn proud of yourself,” she said affectionately and was pleased to see him crack a genuine smile.

“Sounded pompous, huh?”

She made a show with her thumb and forefinger. “Just a little ... but I know if anyone can do it, Trev, you can.”

He patted her on the shoulder. “Thanks and good luck, yourself.” He indicated Queen Aaibhe’s chamber with his chin. “I heard you’ve been called on the carpet again, for your *wayward ways*,” he smiled and shook his head. “You know, she once sent Breslyn into the middle of the ocean floor and took away all his powers ...” His eyes teased, and he flicked a long tress of bright red hair before her eyes.

She pushed her hair out of her face and touched him, for she was

genuinely worried this time. She knew he would not totally understand; Trevor did not care for humans. However, he would sympathize with her all the same. Instead, he released a bark of laughter.

“Don’t worry—she probably goes easier on her princesses.”

“Not this time ...” Royce sighed. “I didn’t just bend the rules, Trev—I exploded them.”

“I heard,” he said softly and then added as he twirled another strand of her long hair and flung it across her nose, “It’s okay, Red—you couldn’t help it. Don’t know why these humans draw you in so completely, but she knows your state of mind is compassionate and as wild as your fiery disposition, so don’t worry, she won’t banish you.”

He smiled and shifted off, and Royce took a long drag of air and blew it out slowly. She entered the queen’s chambers, and *there she was*—Aaibhe, Queen of the Seelie Fae.

The queen held her fingers pyramided, and she looked to Royce like she was ... what? Royce couldn’t tell. She tried to see what those brilliant, iridescent eyes held—controlled fury? No—was it disappointment? *No ... ah, determination.* The queen had most certainly made up her mind to handle the situation differently than she had in the past. *Uh oh—trouble*, Royce thought as she closed and then reopened her eyes. At least she’d remembered to change her jeans and tee for a pretty blue silk dress and had blinked her hair into a thin gold band that held up the long strands on the top of her head in the style she knew the queen preferred.

The queen smiled softly, patted the chair next to her own, and said softly, “Sit, my Princess, and do not hesitate—*explain yourself.*”

“My Queen,” Royce started to say as she sat. “First, allow me to point out that the child wasn’t dying. Hence, it wasn’t as though I was bringing him back to life ...” The words she had just blurted sounded absurd even to her, but it was the truth, at least as she saw matters. She immediately observed the queen’s reaction and stopped any other words that wanted to tumble from her lips. Instead, she folded her hands together in her lap and tried again, more calmly. “What I am trying to say, Queen Aaibhe is this: I did not really infringe on the path of destiny ... and even if I did a little, it was totally necessary because he would not have been in that awful and unacceptable situation—well, it was in essence, our fault, wasn’t it ... I mean ...”

“*Our fault?*” The Queen of the Seelie Fae raised her lovely brow and interrupted. “How so?”

“The Dark Fae escaped because we couldn’t stop them from doing so. One of those sinister monsters chased young David, reached for him, and the child stepped backwards into the street. He was hit by a car and would have been paralyzed for the rest of his life. Our fault.”

“I see,” Aaibhe said so softly Royce almost couldn’t hear her, and then she asked, “So then, my Princess, do we make it our business to round up any humans that survived an attack by the Dark Fae but are in critical condition

and heal them? Is that what you are suggesting?"

"No, I know that is not possible, although I wish it were. I know we can't reveal ourselves to the general population, but in this case I was right there! I saw it happen, and before I could do anything to stop it ..." She shook her head. "David and his family are friends of mine, and I have a great affection for them ... and ... I ... I couldn't ..."

"You were there because you were involved with a human family—and overly involved and attached to this child. It put you in a precarious situation. You lent your aid without permission, you risked exposing yourself and *us* to humans, for what? So that you could heal the boy. I am not without compassion, my dear. I do understand. I do see it all very clearly. The question is *do you?*" Aaibhe said grimly.

"I am their friend—they don't know that I am a Fae ... let alone a Fae princess. They didn't know that David's injuries were serious. I healed him before they knew anything. They simply did not realize anything untoward had occurred."

"Let me understand your point of view. Are you saying that when we happen to be on the spot ... and a *favoured human* is injured, we may heal them without taking precautions or worrying about the repercussions?"

"No ... that is not what I am saying." Royce pleaded with her eyes and hoped her queen would understand. "These were extraordinary circumstances. The Dark Fae *were* our responsibility, and they escaped because *we didn't* keep them contained. They were loose—killing and maiming—and David was there, right before my eyes, and he would have been crippled all his little life and ..."

"And as I have said, I quite understand—do not think I don't—but what I want to know, because I am your queen and must discern your reasoning, is did you give some thought to what it would mean to the future if you healed him?"

"I ... no, there wasn't time." Royce hung her head and then raised it. "Besides, we can never be sure what is destined and what is not. Perhaps there was a reason I just happened to be there when this took place ... perhaps I was meant to heal him?"

"You have this all worked out then, have you?" the queen said with a cluck of her tongue. Then with pursed lips she took Royce's chin in her hand and made her look into her eyes once more.

"I ... didn't think about anything else. He is a child, and I care for him ..." Royce pleaded.

"Of course you did, and I do believe you know that when you broke our rules, rules that were put in place after great consideration and necessity, you walked the edge of danger with regards to the workings of our beliefs. We Fae understand that tampering with the fates is a serious act." Aaibhe clucked briefly and then added, "Your parents are concerned about your obsession with humans, and unlike Prince Breslyn, you don't have the maturity and

experience to deal with the intricacies of ‘breaking the rules’.”

“My Queen ...” she started. “His fate should not have been determined by the Dark Fae.”

Aaibhe put up a hand and halted her from speaking. “I have asked you to sit in on Council meetings with Aida and Ete as your guides ... do you not care for them?”

“I adore them. They are like older, wiser sisters ... well, Ete is. Aida is just so much fun ...”

“And still you do not attend the meetings,” the queen said, clearly reproving her. “What am I going to do with you? You need to mature, Royce. You need to take your place on the Council.”

“The Council meetings are so boring, and I am not interested in politics.” She sighed and studied a work of art across the room.

“Duty sometimes is boring but nevertheless necessary.” The queen waved off any answer her princess might give, and it was clear that she was becoming impatient with her. “So, because the Trackers and our Royal Houses are overtaxed rounding up the stray Dark Fae in Ireland and Scotland ... and even England—”

“Yes, my brother said some have escaped to England, and he went after them this morning,” she stuck in, hoping to show that she was in fact concerned about the situation.

“Indeed, and we are even working with the Milesians, one in particular, Chancemont LeBlanc.” The queen inclined her lovely head. “I know that you have heard something of *that* tragic story.”

“Yes, Trevor has just left me to join the Milesian in the effort of tracking and capturing Pestale.”

“Precisely, my Princess.” The queen rose from her seat and took a turn in place. Royce watched her with dread. *Here it comes*, she thought.

“As it happens, Princess Royce, I have decided to make you a part of *their team*. You have specific and extraordinary abilities that they might find useful.”

“*Me*—my punishment is to team with Trevor?” Now this was beyond wonderful, Royce thought, almost clasping her hands together. *Is this what she calls punishment?*

The queen’s iridescent eyes narrowed, and one delicate brow rose. “Do not think you have gotten away with your misbehavior. Indeed, little one, I am putting you in grave danger. It is time you stopped playing mother to these humans and began the business of being who you are—a Seelie Fae princess.” She waved off Royce’s objection and silenced her with a glare. “This is a mission that you must execute with purpose and determination. It is time you wake up and realize your duty to your own kind. I need you to open your lovely eyes and recognize what is important in the large scope of things.” The queen sighed and then added, “This will not be easy, child. Chancemont will not want you to accompany them, and he will not welcome you. If you wish

to carry out your Queen's orders, you will have to prove yourself to him, and I expect that you will find a way to do so."

Royce was so relieved that the queen was not relegating her to the middle of a mountain without power to get out—she had heard enough stories to worry about this—that she almost jumped up and hugged Queen Aaibhe. However, she checked herself and bowed her head. "Yes, my Queen ... I will do as you ask."

About Claudy Conn

Claudy Conn, a native New Yorker, now lives with her husband, Bob; their wolf, Cherokee; and Cherokee's son, Rocky Man, who weighs in presently at 190 pounds.

She loves horses and riding and raised her ten-year-old gelding Southern Pride from the moment he was born. She also loves gardening, swimming, skiing, hiking, and travel—and of course, reading, writing, but no, she says, no arithmetic!

To get her monthly news, her reviews for all her new paranormal romances, and excerpts, come on and visit her at her website: <http://www.claudyconn.com>

To see pictures of Cherokee—and her shepherd-wolf son!—have a look at her Facebook page:

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Claudy-Conn-Paranormal-Romance-Author/135826686471445>

Read more about Claudy Conn's books

Risqué Regencies

Myriah Fire

Myriah meets Kit under the worst circumstances and their meeting was an explosion of wills, and actions, and it was what finally set Myriah on fire ...

Oh, Cherry Ripe

Cheryl Elton has been in London for three seasons and refuses to be courted. When her mother takes matters into her own hands, Cherry runs!

Rogues, Rakes & Jewels

What happens when an eligible marquis pretends to be a rake and a gambler, and the woman he is supposed to be courting disguises herself as a masked French card dealer? Find out in this spicy, risqué Regency romance.

Taffeta and Hotspur

Hotspur wants Taffeta—how far will he go to make her his? Taffeta has a secret—will it land her in trouble?

Wildfire Kiss

Lady Babs is a rule-breaker, but has she met her match in Lord Wildfire?

After the Storm

Jenny insisted she would never fall in love again, but she found herself drawn to the handsome Earl of Danfield. She also knew about his wild reputation, but it didn't matter. His proposal would give her what she wanted. Peace.

Runaway Heart

Chelsea takes London by storm, but the only man she wants thinks she is no more than a child.

Lady Bess

Lady Bess has fallen hard for the Earl of Dunkirk, but she has also fallen into a bevy of secrets. Evil hovers. Although Bess doesn't look for it, she finds it—and Bess is not your average, simpering female. She takes on danger and mayhem like she does everything else: full throttle. Adventure ensues as we travel with Bess through romance and the battle of her life.

Lady Star

Sir Edward meets his match when he meets Star, but is there too much keeping them apart?

Serena

Lord Daniel Pendleton has met his match in Serena. A game of twists and misunderstandings ensue, and a lively romance begins

Witches, Warlocks, and Dark Magic

Dark Love

One goal consumes Chazma Donnelly: find the dark sorcerer who murdered her parents. The trail takes her Ireland and Jethro McBain, but will it take her soul?

Netherby Halls

Matters at Netherby are not what they seem, and neither is the handsome marquis. Unsure whom to trust, Sassy has to find her way through a maze of evil and magic.

Lady X

Exerilla has to run from her Dark Warlock father. Her mother sends her into the past to escape him and the marriage he plans for her. What is a modern American miss to do in 19th century England?

Hungry Moon Series

Hungry Moon: Quicksilver

Ravena is running from who and what she is, but the more she runs away, the further she falls.

Hungry Moon: Destiny

Luke says Kelsey isn't his type, and Kelsey is sure Luke is a heart-breaker, but the hybrid and the wolf shifter must find a way to work together to fight a threat of unthinkable proportions.

Through Time Series

Through Time—Pursuit

Revenge is the driver. Will love be the equalizer in *Through Time—Pursuit*? Chance LeBlanc and Princess Royce are about to find out in this contemporary fantasy romance, picking up where *Catch & Hold—Legend* left off.

Through Time—Whiplash

Four Dark Royals are about to march out of the Dark Realm with an army of monsters at their back. The Queen of the Seelie Fae is in jeopardy with the Council because of her love for Morgan LeBlanc, a Milesian. Enter, unexpectedly, Jazmine Decker, a Fios (Fae seer) who finds herself unwittingly thrown into the past with Trevor. Chaos lies ahead.

Through Time—Slamming

Book 3 in the Through Time series takes us on a battle filled ride with Jazz and Trevor as Frankie comes into her own.

Through Time—Frankie

Meet Frankie of Sluagh now all grown up and ready to take on the world. She wants the Dark Prince and goes against her family ... but he turns away. All the while, his brother plots to take over the world once again.

Through Time—Compulsion

Through Time—Compulsion finds a new demon on the loose, and this one thinks he is a god. He isn't, but he is powerful beyond the Faes' imagination.

Shadow Series

ShadowLove—Stalkers

Shawna Rawley has no choice but to run when Pentim Rawley, one of the most evil vampires who has ever lived, discovers she is his daughter. Chad MacFare has an offer for Shawna he thinks she can't afford to refuse: he'll protect her from Pentim and his minions. But Shawna doesn't trust the sexy immortal. She knows he has his own agenda—he wants to kill her father, and he wants to set her up as bait ...

ShadowHeart—Slayer

Damon Drummond and Nikki Walker are on opposite sides. He is a potent vampire—she is a skilled and powerful vampire slayer. Problem right there ... but when they look at each other, sparks of all kinds fly. Too much stands between them: He will live forever, she will not, and yet ...

ShadowLife—Hybrid

WB and his clan have moved in, and section by section Dublin is going dark. When the team needs help, they turn to a shapeshifter, Roxie MacBran.

Legend Series

Prince, Prelude—Legend

In this stand-alone tale and the backstory for the Legend series, we find ourselves in 1814. Gais and the prince come head to head over a woman. We will see Lamia DuLaine when she first sees Julian Talbot, and we will meet the first Maxie Reigate. Come along and see their world unfold ...

Spellbound—Legend

Maxie is a reluctant heroine who travels to Scotland to find and save herself. Julian is a Druid priest in a modern age, and he is full of guilt—Can Maxie turn to him? Or will she turn to Prince Breslyn, a Royal Fae hunk offering her everything?

Aaibhe—Shee Queen (Novelette)

This is a love story but it is fringed with envy, jealousy, and bitterness—oh and more. It is laced with the havoc those devastating emotions can bring. It is about the seeds of hate born of love, and what havoc that hate can wantonly roar over even immortals. This is a story of Aaibhe, Queen of the Seelie

Fae, because she deserves that it be told.

Shee Willow—Legend

Half-human, half-Fae Willow Lang has never felt she truly fit in either world, but she's doing her best to ignore her Fae nature. But when she finds herself in the middle of a conflict between the Seelie Fae and the evil Dark Fae, she must embrace her Fae powers in order to protect the Human world.

Prince in the Mist (Novella)

Fact one: By tradition and treaty, Fae do not interfere with the human world—it is against the rules. Fact two: For a Royal Fae prince who suffers from the ennui of immortality, watching and interacting with humans—especially lovely, spirited human females—can be entertaining. Fact three: When entertainment changes to affection, and affection becomes love, rules will be broken.

Trapped—Legend

Magical powers, a castle, and a charming prince sound like the ingredients for a fairy-tale life, but for BJ Mulroy, reality turns out to be a whole lot more complicated. The war between the Seelie and the Unseelie is heating up, BJ has been drawn into the fray ... and there's the matter of the seventeenth-century hunk in the painting.

Free Falling—Legend

They call her Z, and she is a handful ready to explode. She has entered the war against Gais and the Dark Fae and means to take him on all by herself. She is driven. Aaibhe, Queen of the Seelie Fae, has other plans, and she sends in Prince Danté to execute and preserve her wishes. When Z and the prince meet, hackles go up on both sides.

Catch & Hold—Legend

Half-human/half-Daoine Fae Radzia MacDaun—Z to her friends—finds herself in the Dark Realm, where she'll have to fight Gaiscioch on his own turf. Danté, Prince of the Tuatha Dé and Z's lover, is not about to let her face this danger alone, however, and the two of them are thrust on a ride that takes them to the edge of life as we know it ...